

An Outdated Sapiential Theology for Understanding the Present: the Case of China

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1. Introduction: Neither God nor Law? An Unfounded Prejudice

China turns out to be the West's 'other' par excellence, as the current international conjuncture has revealed on more than one occasion. For centuries, the Chinese universe has posed many different questions to the Western gaze, as demonstrated by the plurality of studies and disciplines that, in various capacities, deal with the case of China. A fact of absolute importance, China has been, and still is, an immense test-bed for Christianity. What the well-known historian A.J. Toynbee wrote more than sixty years ago proved prophetic:

Instead of trying, as we have been trying since their day, to disengage a secular version of the Western civilization from Christianity, the Jesuits tried to disengage Christianity from the non-Christian ingredients in the Western civilization and to present Christianity [...] to the Chinese, not as the local religion of the West, but as a universal religion with a message for all mankind. The Jesuits stripped Christianity of its accidental and irrelevant Western accessories, and offered the essence of it to China in a Chinese, [...] intellectual and literary dress in which there was no incongruous Western embroidery to jar on Asian sensibilities. This experiment miscarried at the first attempt through the fault of domestic feuds within the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church of the day, which had nothing to do with either Christianity or China [...]; but, considering that [...] China and Christianity are all still on the map, we may expect—and hope—to see the experiment tried again. The recent victory of Communism in China over a Western civilization divorced from Christianity is no evidence that, in China, Christianity has no future in a coming chapter of history which today is still below our historical horizon.¹

After more than half a century, the Church seems to have accepted Toynbee's invitation-prophecy, has taken an interest, and has set itself in the direction of a meeting that would really put the role of Christianity in Chinese soil on the agenda. The most recent ecclesial fruit of this mutual search has produced the brief but dense provisional *Communiqué* of 22 September 2018 between the Holy See and the Government of the People's Republic of China; this text

is the fruit of a gradual and reciprocal rapprochement, has been agreed following a long process of careful negotiation and foresees the possibility of periodic reviews of its application. It concerns the nomination of Bishops, a question of great importance for the life of the Church, and creates the conditions for greater collaboration at the bilateral level. The shared hope is that this agreement may favour a fruitful and forward-looking process of institutional dialogue and may contribute positively to the life of the Catholic Church in China, to the common good of the Chinese people and to peace in the world.²

Why China? On a closer inspection, there is more at stake in the Celestial Empire than just a question of the meeting of cultures. First and foremost, there is a serious *metaphysical* topic. Some have argued that the very nature of Chinese language and thought precluded the development of certain philosophical (or theological) concerns in ancient China, such as the notion of truth, transcendence, substance, soul, God. It is often heard that the Chinese language is primarily pragmatic, bent on action, incapable of formulating abstractions. The well-known sinologist Marcel Granet argued that Chinese characters are «symboles plus puissants pour orienter l'action qu'aptes à formuler des concepts, des théories ou des dogmes»³, concluding his best-known essay by synthesising Chinese thought with the terrible formula «ni Dieu, ni Loi».⁴

We wonder whether such peremptory judgements are more a prejudiced assumption than the result of actual analysis. One might ask what would have prevented early Chinese thinkers from developing concepts identical to, or at least akin to, those of Western thinkers, especially those fundamental to philosophical discourse such as the distinction between being and non-being, reality and appearance, God and the world. Why could this variety of concepts not have existed in Chinese thought?

On closer inspection, recent sinological literature seems to say otherwise, or at least leave open the hypothesis.⁵ Not only that. We have been accustomed, especially in the contemporary West, to a *logical* truth, to an often *propositional*, *analytical* conception of truth, which is certainly a fundamental aspect of the knowledge of reality, but which nevertheless does not exhaust it. The *verum* was in fact defined, in Western philosophy up to the threshold of modernity, as one of the *transcendentals*⁶, i.e. those properties of being such as unity and goodness, which coincide with what is common to all beings. From a gnosēological point of view, transcendentals would be the first concepts of thought, since they cannot be logically traced back to something that precedes them, and are therefore *co-extensive* with being, with all that is. Now, if this is true, then whatever their language, civilisation, or personal history, all seek the truth of being, of reality, all men as men; consequently, what truth (goodness, beauty) is, the Chinese too can always and everywhere ask themselves, and, like them, so can every human being:

Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life? These are the questions which we find in the sacred writings of Israel, as also in the Veda and the Avesta; we find them in the writings of Confucius and Lao-Tze, and in the

preaching of Tirthankara and Buddha; they appear in the poetry of Homer and in the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, as they do in the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. They are questions which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. In fact, the answer given to these questions decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives.⁷

Admittedly, for Chinese thought, a logic as stringent and ironclad as the Greek, Aristotelian one, perhaps never existed. And it is also true that Chinese wisdom tends more towards practice than theory. But the crux of the matter is precisely this: is truth only about theory? *Quid est veritas?*⁸ For centuries in the West, the common sense that the intellect was made to know reality and that truth was the impact of being on our knowledge dominated certainty: «Truth is the squaring of thought and thing».⁹

With the dawn of modernity, we have witnessed not only a progressive reduction of truth to thought, but also the progressive evasion of the question of whether there is a *truth of existence*, which any medieval would have answered in the affirmative, and that is the *bonum*. St. Thomas, while not confusing the different planes of this quest, was able to harmonise them as perhaps no one else before, saying that truth is the good of the intellect, but at the same time practical intelligence has as its own good, that is, truth oriented towards a righteous desire.¹⁰ Now, Chinese thought has gone precisely in the direction of this question, this search for a good and upright life, although it has always tended more towards desire than reflection:

If the warp of Heaven is disordered and the innate character of things violated, Arcane Heaven is denied its potential. Beasts that live together will scatter, and birds will all sing at night. Disaster will extend to plants and trees, and calamity will befall insects. Ah! Such is the calamity caused by the control of people!¹¹

It is well known that, among the Chinese, there has always been more interest in the identification of *correspondences* (synchronies, harmonies)

than the exquisitely Western focus on *causality*.¹² This mechanism is more understandable if one considers that in Chinese thought there is a certain modesty regarding the human possibilities of theoretical understanding of reality in its totality, even the reality of oneself: «“There is no one that knows me” Tsze kung said, “What do you mean by thus saying that no one knows you?” He replied, “I do not murmur against Heaven. I do not grumble against men, my studies lie low, and my penetration rises high. But there is Heaven; - that knows me!”».¹³ Corresponding to this, however, is a strong belief in *practical wisdom*, a wisdom that does not reduce but complements discursive resources to describe reality. This is the truth behind the common view that Chinese philosophy is relatively concrete, practical and uninterested in truth. We are dealing with a thought that prefers persuasion and suggestion to argumentation.

On closer inspection, in the Chinese tradition one rarely finds an appreciation for the discovery of the *way* things really are that is separate from how this discovery fits into a *desirable, good* way of life. This is why a key term to render the idea of truth in China has always been 道 *Dào*, a polysemantic term that can be translated as *way, path, method, discourse*.¹⁴ Practical reason, it is true, concerns the singular, but it is also true that what is directed to the practical is not necessarily disconnected from the universal: when we read reflections like «the superior man bends his attention to what is radical. That being established, all practical courses naturally grow up. Filial piety and fraternal submission! - are they not the root of all benevolent actions?».¹⁵ Now, we see here that there is no indication that this is limited to Chinese culture; rather, Confucius here means to say something about man, something universal. The quintessential classic of the Daoist universe, at the same time, leaves open very radical questions, to the point that some contemporary sinologists have spoken of the *apophaticism* of the 道 *Dào*:

The Dao is (like) the emptiness of a vessel; and in our employment of it we must be on our guard against all fullness. How deep and unfathomable it is, as if it were the Honoured Ancestor of all things! We should

The Dao is (like) the emptiness of a vessel; and in our employment of it we must be on our guard against all fullness. How deep and unfathomable it is, as if it were the Honoured Ancestor of all things! We should blunt our sharp points, and unravel the complications of things; we should attemper our brightness, and bring ourselves into agreement with the obscurity of others. How pure and still the Dao is, as if it would ever so continue! I do not know whose son it is. It might appear to have been before God.¹⁷

Thinking back to what has been said so far, the temptation to see an anti-metaphysical interest in the Chinese tradition is perhaps a *self-fulfilling prophecy*, an ill-concealed desire to see Chinese thinkers as representatives of the path taken by western philosophy too late; after all, Voltaire himself thought he could easily get rid of the Christian God by calling into question the experience of the Jesuit missionaries in China.¹⁸ Admittedly, quantitatively speaking, the modern evangelisation of China fell terribly short of expectations, but one wonders whether the truth of an action, and especially of a missionary action, is a matter of numbers, consensus and visibility, and not rather of *substance*.

Father Matteo Ricci SJ (Li Mǎdòu 利瑪竇, 1552–1610),¹⁹ in the wake of the Fathers of the Church, critical of the limitations of paganism but in respectful dialogue with the wisdom of the philosophers, used a method that has always been practised in the Church, with a conformation that has become famous as *accommodation*,²⁰ and which, thanks to the recent theorisation by my mentor, Father Antonio Olmi, can rightly be called sapiential realism:

Adopting this approach, in thought and in life, means accepting all the original certainties and the first principles of implicit philosophy (the most important of which is the ‘primacy of reality’), and being willing to know reality itself not simply with the help of ‘natural’ reason (concrete but limited), or ‘scientific’ reason (rigorous but also limited), or ‘philosophical’ reason (rigorous but abstract), but by means of ‘sapiential’ reason. Aimed only at the search for the truth that is good and the good that is true, this

mode of reason is more analogue than analytical, synthetic or dialectical; it signals instead of demonstrating; it 'tastes' the truth instead of 'seeing it'; and in order to express this ineffable sentiment, uses thought to force words to go beyond thought and words directly to the heart of the created reality and the mystery of the Creator.²¹

2. Realistic Sapiential Christocentrism as a Theological Choice for China

I want to consider seriously the possibility that Ricci's work was only an episode, an albeit excellent application of that broader sapiential realism that Olmi theorised on several occasions. And so it is that, extending Olmi's syntagma and analysing it in a more extensive and exhaustive treatment, I have reformulated it in terms of a new paradigm for theology: *realistic sapiential Christocentrism*.²² Underlying this paradigm is a certainty: affirming the incarnation of Λόγος implies not only the ascertaining a fact but also the establishing a method. Christian theology always takes its cue, first and foremost, from Revelation, which finds its culmination in the Event-Christ, and both the typological scriptural reading and the theology of the *semina Verbi* present a

radical Christocentrism: Christ presents Himself as the Fulfilment and hermeneutical Key to the Revelation attested in Scripture, establishing a new relationship between God, the world and man and inscribing the whole in that *Communio speculum* that is the Church. The Fathers themselves extended and made rigorous this foundation by applying it to everything that is explicitly located *extra Ecclesiam*, achieving various nuances in reading the presence of the Word elsewhere than in the Church.

The formulation of sapiential realism in St. Thomas Aquinas has reached a point of no return - currently unsurpassed - in providing theology with the most adequate and extensive tools for a correct and non-partial presentation of the revealed datum. Not only that, the Magisterium has not ceased to propose Aquinas as the undisputed and unrivalled *auctoritas* in theological reflection:

Thomas had the great merit of giving pride of place to the harmony which exists between faith and reason. [...] Although he made much of the supernatural character of faith, the Angelic Doctor did not overlook the importance of its reasonableness; indeed he was able to plumb the depths and explain the

meaning of this reasonableness. [...] This is why the Church has been justified in consistently proposing Saint Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology. [...] Saint Thomas was impartial in his love of truth. He sought truth wherever it might be found and gave a consummate demonstration of its universality. In him, the Church's Magisterium has seen and recognized the passion for truth [...]. Looking unreservedly to truth, the realism of Thomas could recognize the objectivity of truth and produce not merely a philosophy of "what seems to be" but a philosophy of "what is".²³

Of this sapiential realism, *ante litteram* in Scripture and the Fathers, *theorice* in St Thomas, there have been other manifestations in the history of theology, whether conscious or not. One concrete historical application was within the evangelisation of China by the Society of Jesus between the 16th and 18th centuries. From the spiritual and sapiential horizon inaugurated by St Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*,²⁴ and condensed pedagogically in the *Ratio studiorum* of Society of Jesus, up to Ricci's *Catechism*²⁵ and to lesser-known but no less relevant works.²⁶

After a certain positivistic univocism



that had prevailed until the beginning of the 20th century, contemporary thought has rediscovered and re-admitted that the text as such, and every text, is a *textus* - a fabric - comprising author, context and reader. This applies a fortiori with sacred Scripture, which *crescit cum legentibus*. Not only that. Without certainly disqualifying the literal aspect and the strong density of the philological contribution - sinological, in the case in question, - the theological horizon moves, however, on another level, no less normative. In this sense we want to make our own the Gadamerian hermeneutic idea of *applicatio* as equidistance between *intentio auctoris* and *receptio lectoris*, since it is «neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but co-determines it as a whole from the beginning».²⁷ The essential point is then to carry out this applicatio not in a mere comparison of knowledge, nor in a human and arbitrary invasion of the field, but in the light of the logic of the Incarnation that the Mystery of Christ discloses. This hermeneutic process that Christianity opens up in relation to culture, any culture, as the religion of Λόγος made flesh, is what lies behind Chesterton's provocative yet suggestive words about the opening of an infinite horizon that conversion to Christianity, the Key to the whole of reality, generates:

I attempt no apologetic about why the creed should be accepted. But in answer to the historical query of why it was accepted and is accepted, I answer for millions of others in my reply; because it fits the lock, because it is like life. It is one among many stories; only it happens to be a true story. It is one among many philosophies; only it happens to be the truth. We accept it; and the ground is solid under our feet and the road is open before us. It does not imprison us in a dream of destiny or a consciousness of the universal delusion. It opens to us not only incredible heavens but what seems to some an equally incredible earth, and makes it credible. This is the sort of truth that is hard to explain because it is a fact; but it is a fact to which we can call witnesses. We are Christians and Catholics not because we worship a key, but because we have passed a door; and

felt the wind that is the trumpet of liberty bow over the land of the living.²⁸

A door to open, China, the Key to it, Christ. All that remains is to find the lock in which to insert it. Well then, what is the intersection that Christ, Truth incarnate, opens up as he encounters the universe China? It seemed to us, with a simplification perhaps worthy of the great narratives of the history of early 20th century ideas, but probably not without foundation, to be identified in the category of *Wisdom*. Wisdom is a very special analogical lens on reality, since it manages to hold together, without dissolving them, the structural poles of which reality, Creation and the relationship between God and creature are composed. Let us therefore try to reread everything said according to an *analogia sapientiae*.²⁹

Wisdom is presented as a *good* knowledge of reality; on the human level it is the integration of truth and good, intellect and will, in terms of a *savouring* (latin *sāpĕre*) of reality. It is precisely for this reason that the term cannot be defined in an unambiguous sense, while at the same time maintaining a subtle, ordered connection between planes, thus avoiding equivocation; for this reason we intend to propose it as a neuralgic analogical category for theological reflection as well. The *sapientia* brings together under a single analogical category the ethical world (φρόνησις), the world of knowledge (σοφία), and even the world of biblical wisdom (חִכְמָה *hokmah*) and the hypostasis of God himself (Σοφία), all without fragmenting but also without confusing the planes:

Understood in this extended sense, the figure of the wise man is certainly one of the highest examples of human achievement: he is the one who knows and who knows how to act, who sees more clearly than others the relationship between truth and good. An 'evil sage' is a contradiction in terms: it is rather the antithesis of the sage, the 'foolish and insipid' (Deut 32:6) in the biblical sense, 'who has eyes but does not see, who has ears but does not hear' (Jer 5:15). the authentic sage, on the other hand, is identified by three essential characteristics: obedience to reality, the search for truth, the desire for good.³⁰

With regard to the consideration of the religious fact, the notion of wisdom is strategic because it allows us to circumvent, at least from a theoretical perspective, the split between knowledge and experience that very often plagues the usual classifications. Wisdom, in its classical meaning of σοφία (*scire per causas*) and φρόνησις (practical wisdom, *prudentia*), allows neither the intellectual nor the moral aspect to be disconnected from religious experience. An emblematic case of this discourse is precisely Chinese thought, which highlights a dimension of the human and the religious that is irreducible to classical categorisations. The Dominican C. Geffré stated:

Il y a en effet des religions avec une emphase prophétique, éthique, historique. Dieu se rend présent au monde des hommes par une parole, un commandement, une loi. C'est le cas des religions monothéistes. Nous sommes alors dans une logique existentielle. il y a des religions avec une emphase mystique, métaphysique, esthétique. C'est le cas des religions de l'Extrême-Orient. Nous sommes alors plutôt dans une logique de correspondance que l'on peut appeler aussi une logique symbolique. Si l'on envisage les rapports de Dieu et du divin avec le monde, nous sommes dans l'ordre de la «participation». Il y a une manifestation non verbale du sacré et l'homme se définit surtout par son appartenance à un temps originaire et à un cosmos sacré. En fait, c'est une des caractéristiques du christianisme de combiner ces deux logiques et de comporter une tension entre le pôle «parole» et le pôle «sacrement».³¹

A fundamental concept in Chinese thought, also political, is the *Mandate of Heaven* (*Tianming* 天命 *tiānmìng*),³² conceived as both a moral law and a cosmic law. There is only one order that is at once cosmic, social and ethical. By virtue of the Chinese *Weltanschauung*, Heaven and man are not separated, to the extent that any perturbation of society has its counterpart in a perturbation of physical nature; at the same time, there is a close link between family, society and Empire (State) at the service of the most authentic realisation of man, to the extent that Chinese thought has been called *universism*.³³

Chinese thought proposes an authentic sapiential reading of man (in harmony with the Cosmos), of which the virtue of *humanity* (仁 *rén*) is perhaps the summary figure.³⁴ The Chinese particularity lies precisely in this sapiential mentality that is not confused purely and simply with ethics (understood in an exclusively practical sense) and at the same time does not exclude another dimension, as we have seen with regard to Confucian theism: «On serait tenté de dire que le sapientiel est au-delà de la distinction du sacré et du profane. Il est de l'ordre de l'existentiel, si par «existentiel» on convient d'entendre l'humain véritable»;³⁵ in the Chinese case, we would then have a kind of *humanist religion*, or a *philosophy of holiness*.³⁶ This virtue, however, is not merely anthropological or humanistic in the atheistic sense. Human wisdom is participation in the Wisdom of Heaven that is inscribed in the human heart. Certainly there is a universe of intricate differences that casts doubt on any easy appropriation, yet we want to «seulement manifester des non-incompatibilités et je tente de discerner dans le sapientiel chinois comme une mystérieuse pierre d'attente par rapport à la singularité du religieux chrétien».³⁷

Interestingly, it is precisely through the Wisdom Writings that the Old Testament narrative acquired its universality and ensured a possible encounter between Israel and the Nations.³⁸ At the same time, the books of Wisdom, Proverbs³⁹ and many Psalms refer to Wisdom as a divine attribute, and St Paul states that «to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God [θεοῦ σοφίαν]».⁴⁰

3. Religion and Revelation: What Connection?

The inestimable and wise dynamism that Christianity achieves in relation to religion, including both the problem of the cosmos and that of existence, conceives precisely the relationship between God and the creature as an *analogical* relationship. This implies first of all that God is not the absolutization of any creature, neither the spiritual nor the universal, neither will nor thought, neither the personal nor the ideal: he is not the *coincidentia opposi-*

torum. He is beyond everything, beyond all comprehensible content, and it is precisely this *in-comprehensibility* that allows the intellect and will to be open to such *Deus absconditus*.

On the other hand, however, this totality of Creation, in its contrasts and ever new tensions, is God's (natural) revelation from above; this is to be understood not in a pantheistic sense, since this revelation is not necessary, limiting or additional to God himself, but rather as the unveiling of the mysterious Meaning to which the totality of creatures in the fabric of their unity of tensions and polarities points, in a different way. In this sense, the creaturely is the analogy of God, it is the *vestigium Trinitatis* that unveils and reveals the God in and above Himself: «Console-toi, tu ne me chercherais pas si tu ne m'avais trouvé».⁴¹ Herein lies the decisive reason from which Christian theology proceeds with regard to the problem of nature and the problem of the existence of religion: in the analogy it unites all that is creaturely in an overall likeness to God, which in its ultimate essence is constant *potentia oboedientialis* towards Him. The analogy disavows any dualism between immanence and transcendence, preserving the distinction of both:

He made from one the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, and he fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions, so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far from any one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'.⁴²

The analogy is like a thin line of demarcation that qualifies Christian Religion versus religions, separating the true experience of God from any creaturely reductionism in either direction.

Throughout the breadth of Catholic theology, from protology to Incarnation to Ἐσχάτος, one fundamental point holds true: Creation is directed to God, not the other way around. This unitary, one-way design also reveals the indissolubility of man, of the creature, as an ordered (analogical) unity in itself, in its constitution. Translated into religious discourse, intellect and will, knowledge and love are not conceivable as separate

horizons of attainment of the divine. Moreover, if we wish, intellect and will are themselves analogical to the dynamism of immanence and transcendence respectively:

Now there is this difference between the appetite and the intellect, or any knowledge whatsoever, that knowledge is according as the thing known is in the knower, whilst appetite is according as the desirer tends towards the thing desired. Thus the term of the appetite, namely good, is in the object desirable, and the term of the intellect, namely true, is in the intellect itself.⁴³

Insofar as the cognitive and volitional tensions are different from each other, religious experience and its metaphysical understanding are naturally distinct from each other. Since they are, however, both intentional forms of the same analogy, the factual interaction can be experienced in both directions: religious experience, in its direction of reverence for God as a real, true and good Object, undergoes reflection, and theoretical apprehension, for its part, in its ultimate avoidance of confrontation with the incomprehensible, is animated by the motion of religious reverence out of love.

It is precisely for this reason that it is impossible to find a religious thought or attitude that wants to call itself absolutely Catholic and be at the same time *absolute* intellectual or volitional; just as there is neither absolute immanence nor absolute transcendence in the Catholic vision, neither is there absolute mysticism nor absolute worship, as demonstrated by the greatness of the liturgy itself. It is therefore not authentic mysticism that does not inwardly bear the form of worship; at the same time, Catholic worship is, by its very nature, permeated by the mysticism of loving closeness to God.

However strict the difference between the natural religious endowment and the creature's supernatural elevation remains, and however much the possibility of an internal connection (*ex parte hominis*) between the two (as if there were a supernatural claim on the part of the creature) is not given, both nevertheless find unity in the wisdom of the analogy. Thanks to it, the creature can ultimately only be understood as a

movement from God in which nature and the supernatural are one and the same and, consequently, its religious origin is read as a return to God whose very nature and supernature indicate the unity of the act.

From this perspective, the *minimum* of (implicit) faith through which every man, in his given circumstances and according to his strength, can give himself in sincere surrender to God can be at the same time the *minimum* of (explicit) faith in which man is accepted by God, i.e. the germinal form of supernatural faith in love (*fides caritate formata*);⁴⁴ this is possible if one does not exclude the specifically creaturely qualification of religion, even if its Purpose and Object exceeds any natural desirability. Translated into contemporary terms, God's universal salvific will implies that He gives non-Christians sufficient help to be saved. Those who sincerely seek God and, with His grace, follow the dictates of conscience are on the path to salvation:

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. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. She knows that it is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life. But often men, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator. Or some there are who, living and dying in this world without God, are

exposed to final despair. Wherefore to promote the glory of God and procure the salvation of all of these, and mindful of the command of the Lord, "Preach the Gospel to every creature", the Church fosters the missions with care and attention.⁴⁵

Mysteriously God makes it possible for every man to be associated with the Paschal Mystery.⁴⁶ He, in ways known only to Him,⁴⁷ can lead even the blameless ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please Him, although the Magisterium does not indicate whether it is necessary for Salvation to come to the explicit Christian faith before death; at the same time, the question of whether non-Christian religions contain elements of Revelation and can serve as *means* of Salvation is still left to theology:

Theology today, in its reflection on the existence of other religious experiences and on their meaning in God's salvific plan, is invited to explore if and in what way the



historical figures and positive elements of these religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation. In this undertaking, theological research has a vast field of work under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium. The Second Vatican Council, in fact, has stated that: "the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a participation in this one source". The content of this participated mediation should be explored more deeply, but must remain always consistent with the principle of Christ's unique mediation [...]. Hence, those solutions that propose a salvific action of God beyond the unique mediation of Christ would be contrary to Christian and Catholic faith.⁴⁹

Christian missionary activity serves to rectify, ennoble and perfect the seeds of truth and goodness that God has sown among non-Christian peoples, for the glory of God and the spiritual benefit of the evangelised. It is therefore indispensable to distinguish, in non-Christians, that an act of adherence that may consist of supernatural (explicit) *theological faith* that embraces revealed Truth, and an act of human *belief* that may contemplate error, may coexist. They can coexist precisely because they are not on the same plane. And it is precisely to this clarification that the mission of evangelisation is ordered, which encounters one and the other, the seeds of the Word and human error.⁵⁰ Although God can never cease to be God and the creature can never cease to be the creature, any mutual relational motion always and necessarily remains within the limits of the ultimate tension of unity in the distinction between the two parts.

Theology as wisdom *leads to* God from the creature, but precisely *comprehends* the creature from God. This also explains Christianity's claim to exclusivity: since the direction of the content of religion is fundamentally determined by the relationship between God and the creature, only Christianity can be the one and only true religion that in this relationship does not dissolve God in the creature nor the creature in God. Sacred Scripture ensures that God has never left Himself without witness for any human reality: «In past generations

he allowed all Gentiles to go their own ways; yet, in bestowing his goodness, he did not leave himself without witness». ⁵¹ His testimonies are signs of His saving manifestations to all. Not only that; the inner testimony of every human conscience bears witness to God as Creator and Lawgiver.

The universal proofs of the divine, under the guidance of Grace, can give rise to a rudimentary (implicit) faith that stretches forward in hope and expectation of further manifestations of God's merciful love and guidance for existence. By accepting the signs already given and placing their hope in God's redeeming love in Christ, those who have not heard the Gospel κήρυγμα can still find themselves on the road to Salvation. If they are faithful to the Grace given to them, they may have good hope of receiving that same Bliss for which they yearn. Nevertheless, the search is no substitute for discovery and adherence. To be blessed and saved in this life, one must encounter and adhere to that

gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages but now manifested through the prophetic writings and, according to the command of the eternal God, made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith.⁵²

4. Conclusion: Where are the Boundaries of the Church?

By entering through Baptism into the Mystery of the Cross and Resurrection, Christians undergo a radical transformation that sets them unequivocally *on* the road to Salvation. Only after conversion to the explicit faith can one enter the Community that is nourished by the Word of God and the Sacraments, which enable the faithful to grow in ever greater union with Christ. This fullness of means only occurs in the Church of Christ.

The Christian religion, in this view, is never the *absolutization* of any human religious aspect, of any religious sense or context; it stands on another level; this is precisely why we intend to present the different non-Christian religions not as *ways*, but at most as the *ground*, the (human, natural) *interpretative covering* of the Incarnate Word in history. Insofar as they are human, they

can have the traits of a *premise* for the attainment of perfection, which is only realised in Christ and His Church. A prejudice to be debunked: this does not devalue non-Christian religious experiences, but on the contrary elevates them to the highest point of realisation of the human as a tendency (*relationship*) to God. In fact, to the extent that the supernatural relationship with God includes the natural relationship, its forms (cultural, historical, geographical) also continue to exist, only purified and thus perfected: as the creature is elevated closer to God and God is lowered closer to her, her creatureliness is not abolished but consecrated. To place religious culture within the horizon of Creation is to place it in the highest perspective of *openness* and dignity to Revelation.

The analogical-sapiential structure of the reality revealed by the Mystery of the Incarnate Word is then perfectly reflected in the Church itself, understood as the Body of Christ: the fact that Christianity (including visible and hierarchical catholicity, of course) is the perfect synthesis of unity-distinction-order between the religion of transcendence and the immanence of God in History, between individual religion and community religion, between interior religion and cultic religion, between natural religion (in the sense of the inclusion of the material world) and cultural religion, all in the Light of the Mystery of Christ, constitutes the first and main sign of its divine origin.

The wisdom of the Christian faith is so all-pervasive, and *a fortiori* in virtue of the Incarnation, that it has no limits of extension: for this reason there is no sphere of culture into which the Christian faith has not entered, or cannot enter, in its own right. This is the ultimate principle of Christian inculturation (or interculturality), a synthetic figure of which sapiential dialogue is the primary task for contemporary proclamation. It is neither a question of an *instrumental* dialogue, whose specific character consists in manipulating the interlocutor in order to lead him to share one's own position; nor of a *contextual* dialogue, a polite discussion distinguished by the search for consensus, perhaps superficial and ephemeral, among the participants; nor of a *sectorial* dialogue, carried out between specialists who restrict the debate to a single topic

of common interest; the proposal is that of a *sapiential* dialogue, which has in view the highest good, which derives from the sharing of truth, which is made possible by the obedient adaptation of the interlocutors to reality.⁵³

This, however, reveals a fundamental and scandalously paradoxical aspect of Christianity: the singular *veiling* of the supernatural in the natural, which passes from the figure of Christ to the figure of His Mystical Body, the Church. The inconceivable closeness of God, manifested in it, seems in the end to exist almost only to cover that immeasurable distance of God between the unfathomable Mystery of the Trinity and the creature. The deepest closeness of God to man and of man to God is manifested in Christian interiority, in Christian worship and even in Christian praxis and mysticism, but remembering the underlying *paradox*: «The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand».⁵⁴ Christianity, with its analogical heart, is the only Reality that redeems reality from being, which to human eyes seems at most an explosive unity of contradictions, showing it to the Light of the Word as an ordered unity of tensions, which finds in Him, in Him alone, σοφία of the Cosmos and History, its own Origin, its own clarifying Distinction and its own ultimate End. All this speaks of a path, a way (Via). It might be a further working hypothesis to verify whether the multi-form Way that is the 道 Dào, the beating heart of Chinese thought as Direction, Relation, Meaning, might not in the future definitively and fruitfully encounter the Christian λόγος, which is precisely «the way and the truth and the life».⁵⁵ But perhaps there is an even more radical hypothesis, one that we know to be true (*ex parte Dei*) even if not yet reflected (*ex parte hominis*): this encounter is possible because it has in fact already taken place: «Have I lost anything by being a Catholic? Absolutely nothing. On the contrary, I have gained Christ, and in gaining Christ I have gained all».⁵⁶

NOTES

1. A.J. Toynbee, *The World and the West*, Oxford University Press, London 1953, pp. 64-65.
2. Press Office of the Holy See, *Communiqué concerning the signing of a Provisional Agreement between the*

3. M. Granet, *La pensée chinoise*, Éditions Albin Michel, Paris 1968, *Introduction*.
4. M. Granet, *La pensée chinoise*, p. 476.
5. Among the various essays see the famous H. Fingarette, Confucius. *The secular as sacred*, Harper & Row, New York 1972, and the more recent J.R. Brown – A. McLeod, *Transcendence and non-naturalism in early Chinese thought*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2021.
6. From the Latin *transcendentalia*, *transcendere*, 'to overcome', the term is sometimes made to correspond to the Latin universal, which is in fact not superimposable, although this is not the context for reflection on this issue. For a historical and philosophical framing of the issue cf. A. de Libera, *La querelle des universaux. De Platon à la fin du Moyen Age*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2014.
7. John Paul II (s.), *Encyclical Letter Fides et Ratio*, n. 1.
8. Cf. *Jn* 18:38.
9. Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus», Thomas Aquinas (s.), *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 16, a. 1, resp., *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, rev. by Daniel J. Sullivan, 2 vols (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1952), I, p. 95.
10. «Bene et male mentis, idest intellectus vel rationis, quae est speculativa, et non practica, consistit simpliciter in vero et falso; ita scilicet quod verum absolutum est bonum eius, et falsum absolutum est malum ipsius. Dicere enim verum et falsum est opus pertinens ad quemlibet intellectum. Sed bonum practici intellectus non est veritas absoluta, sed veritas confesse se habens, idest concorditer ad appetitum rectum, sicut ostensum est, quod sic virtutes morales concordant», Thomas Aquinas (s.), *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, l. VI, c. 2.
11. «亂天之經，逆物之情，玄天弗成；解獸之群，而鳥皆夜鳴；災及草木，禍及止蟲。意！治人之過也！», Zhuangzi (莊子) – R.J. Lynn (ed.), *Zhuangzi, A New Translation of the Sayings of Master Zhuang as Interpreted by Guo Xiang*, c. XI, pp. 218-219. All Chinese texts in this article were taken from the *Chinese Text Project* database (<https://text.org/>).
12. Famous is the principle of synchronicity theorised by Carl Gustav Jung from his reflection on Chinese thought, especially from the enigmatic *Classic of Change*, *Yijing* 易經, cf. C.G. Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (USA) 1960.

13. «子曰：「莫我知也夫！」子貢曰：「何為其莫知子也？」子曰：「不怨天，不尤人。下學而上達。知我者，其天乎！」», Confucius, *Analects* [論語 Lúnyǔ], I. XIV 憲問 *Xian Wen*, n. 35, chinese text with english translation in J. Legge (ed.), *The Chinese classics*, 7 voll., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1893-95, I, pp. 152-153.
14. The term 道dào literally can mean way, road, path, course, discourse or even method; it is the fundamental concept of Chinese philosophy, and has exerted considerable influence on subsequent intellectual developments in China. It can function as a noun or a verb, sometimes indicating the road on which one travels, the act of travelling a road, or even the act of making a road by driving someone or building a road. It can also refer to speech, especially within philosophical or moral reflection.; cf. the voice 道dào in *Le Grand Dictionnaire Ricci de la langue chinoise*, Instituts Ricci, Paris – Taipei 2001, 7 voll.
15. «君子務本，本立而道生。孝弟也者，其為仁之本與！», Confucius, *Analects* [論語 Lúnyǔ], I. I 學而 Xue Er, n. 2, in J. Legge (ed.), *The Chinese classics*, I, pp. 2-3.
16. Cf. Laozi (老子) - A. Andreini (ed.), *Daodejing. Il canone della via e della virtù. Testo cinese a fronte*, Einaudi, Bologna 2018, *Introduction*; M. Csikszentmihalyi, «Mysticism and apophatic discourse in the Laozi», in M. Csikszentmihalyi – P.J. Ivanhoe (edd.), *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*, SUNY, New York 1999, pp. 33-58.
17. «道沖而用之或不盈。淵兮似萬物之宗。挫其銳，解其紛，和其光，同其塵。湛兮似或存。吾不知誰之子，象帝之先», Lǎozǐ (老子) – R. Ames – D. Hall (edd.), *Dao De Jing [Dàodéjīng] 道德經*. *A Philosophical Translation*, Random House Publishing Group, New York 2010, c. 4, p. 83.
18. Cf. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, par G. Stenger, GF-Flammarion, Paris 2010, especially the voice *Puissance*.
19. Cf. R. Po-Chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610)*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.
20. Cf. D.E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, The University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1989; Kim Sangkeun, *Strange Names of God. The Missionary Translation of the Divine Name and the Chinese Responses to Matteo Ricci's "Shangti" in Late Ming China, 1583–1644*, Studies in biblical literature, Peter Lang, New York 2004.
21. A. Olmi, «IV. Il "Paradigma di Calcedonia" e il realismo Sapienziale di San Tommaso d'Aquino e di P. Matteo Ricci», in Id., *P. Matteo Ricci e san*

- Tommaso d'Aquino. Sette studi sul tomismo sapienziale [Sacra Doctrina 65(2020)2]*, pp. 147-148.
22. Our doctoral dissertation, published in full, was dedicated to this paradigm: P. Galassi, *Il cristocentrismo realistico sapienziale. Contributo alla teologia delle religioni*, Collana Teologia n. 79, ESD – Edizioni Studio Domenicano, Bologna 2024; cf. also our article P. Galassi, «5. Theological Themes in the First Treatise», in T. Meynard - D. Canaris (edd.), *From Confucius to Zhu Xi. The First Treatise on God in François Noël's Chinese Philosophy (1711)*, Global Perspectives on Medieval and Early Modern Historiography, vol. 1, Brepols, Turnhout 2023, pp. 129-154.
 23. John Paul II (s.), *Encyclical Letter Fides et Ratio*, nn. 43-44.
 24. «Según la disposición de las personas que quieren tomar ejercicios espirituales, es a saber, según que tienen edad, letras o ingenio, se han de aplicar los tales ejercicios / iuxta eius, qui exercetur, habitudinem, puta pro aetate, doctrina vel ingenio, accommodari debent exercitia», Ignazio di Loyola (s.), *Monumenta Ignatiana. Series secunda, Exercitia spiritualia. Textus archetypi*, n. 18, 2 voll., by J. Calveras – C. De Dalmases, Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu, Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, Roma 1955-1969, I, p. 156.
 25. M. Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven [《天主實義》]*, by D. Lancashire - P. Hu Kuo-Chen - T. Meynard, Institute of Jesuit Sources, Boston 2016.
 26. Among others, the major work of the Flemish Jesuit François Noël (1651-1729), to whom the central part of our PhD is dedicated; cf. F. Noël, *Philosophia Sinica tribus tractatibus, Primo Cognitionem Primi Entis, Secundo Ceremonias erga Defunctos, Tertio Ethicam, Juxta Sinarum mentem complectens, Typis Universitatis Carolo-Ferdinandaeae*, Praga 1711.
 27. H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, by J. Weinsheimer - D.G. Marshall, Crossroad, New York 1989.
 28. G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, by K. Belmonte, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1993, pp. 248-249.
 29. Cf. T.J. White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity. A Study in Thomistic Natural Theology*, Sapientia Press, Ave Maria (USA) 2009, especially the c. 8, pp. 251-290.
 30. A. Olmi, «Introduzione», in Id., *P. Matteo Ricci e san Tommaso d'Aquino. Sette studi sul tomismo sapienziale*, 15-16.
 31. C. Geffré, *Le christianisme comme religion de l'Evangile*, Les éditions du Cerf, Paris 2012, pp. 275-276.
 32. Cf. S. Allan, «On the Identity of Shang Di上帝 and the Origin of the Concept of a Celestial Mandate (TIAN MING天命)», *Early China* 31(2007), pp. 1-46.
 33. Cf. J.J.M. De Groot, *Universismus. Die Grundlage der Religion und Ethik, des Staatswesens und der Wissenschaften Chinas*, G. Reimer, Berlin 1918.
 34. Cf. Yao Xinzong, *Confucianism and Christianity. A Comparative Study of Jen [仁 rén] and Agape*, Sussex Academic Press, Eastbourne 1996.
 35. C. Geffré, *Le christianisme comme religion de l'Evangile*, 277.
 36. Cf. L. Vandermeersch, *Le fait religieux*, Fayard, Paris 1993.
 37. C. Geffré, *Le christianisme comme religion de l'Evangile*, 281. Note the allusion to the *pierres d'attente* mentioned by International Theological Commission, *Christianity and Religions* (1997), n. 4, regarding Jean Daniélou's tendency.
 38. Cf. P. Beauchamp, *Le récit, la lettre et le corps*, Cogitatio Fidei, Cerf, Paris 1992.
 39. Cf. especially *Prv* 1-9.
 40. *I Cor* 1:24.
 41. B. Pascal, *Pensées (le mystère de Jésus)*, Hachette, Paris 1917, p. 575.
 42. *Acts* 17:26-28.
 43. «Hoc autem distat inter appetitum et intellectum, sive quamcumque cognitionem, quia cognitio est secundum quod cognitum est in cognoscente, appetitus autem est secundum quod appetens inclinatur in ipsam rem appetitam. Et sic terminus appetitus, quod est bonum, est in re appetibili, sed terminus cognitionis, quod est verum, est in ipso intellectu», Thomas Aquinas (s.), *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 16, a. 1, resp., *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, I, p. 95.
 44. Cf. M. Rose, *Fides caritate formata. Das Verhältnis von Glaube und Liebe in der Summa theologiae des Thomas von Aquin*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen – 2007.
 45. Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium*, n. 16.
 46. Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22.
 47. Cf. Heb 11:6; Second Vatican Council, *Decree Ad Gentes on the mission activity of the Church*, n. 7.
 48. Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium*, 62.
 49. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration Dominus Iesus* (2000), n. 14, an issue also reiterated in an ecclesiological sense in n. 21.
 50. Paths of research in this direction can be, for example, the questioning of the lines of tangency between the salvation of non-Christians and children who die without Baptism, for whom a *funeral Mass for Unbaptized Children Who Die* was inserted after the post-conciliar liturgical reform, which simultaneously includes elements of caution and hope; or, for more strictly theological elaborations, one line is that of the so-called elements of *ecclesiality of non-Christian religions*, inaugurated by Jacques Maritain, cf. F. Daguet, «Présence du Christ aux non-chrétiens: J. Maritain, héritier de Thomas d'Aquin et de Charles de Foucauld», in S.-T. Bonino (ed.), *Actes du Colloque organisé par l'Institut Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin (Toulouse, 13-14 mai 2005)*, sous la direction de S.-Th. Bonino, o.p., *Revue Thomiste* 106(2006)1-2.
 51. *Acts* 14:16-17.
 52. *Rom* 16:25-26.
 53. A. Olmi, «Introduzione», in Id., *P. Matteo Ricci e san Tommaso d'Aquino. Sette studi sul tomismo sapienziale*, 32.
 54. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Kessock Bros. Publishing Co., Lexington (USA) 2012, p. 23.
 55. *Jn* 14:6.
 56. J.C.H. Wu, *Beyond East and West*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (USA) 2018, *Conclusion*.