

# THEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

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THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

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OBSERVATIONS ON THE PROBLEM OF  
THE 'ANONYMOUS CHRISTIAN'

THE central theme of the remarks which follow will be that summed up in the key phrase 'anonymous Christian'. It is recognized that the subject being treated of here is first and foremost a controversy internal to Catholic theology. I myself have given my opinions on this theme several times.<sup>1</sup> A. Röper has made this phrase the title of a book which has appeared in German, English, Italian and Spanish.<sup>2</sup> Klaus Riesenhuber has presented a comprehensive survey on this question.<sup>3</sup> In Japan Hans Waldenfels reacted favourably to my thesis,<sup>4</sup> whereas other European missionaries in the same area took up an emphatically hostile attitude to this thesis of the 'anonymous Christian'.<sup>5</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar<sup>6</sup> and Henri de Lubac<sup>7</sup> likewise expressed their opposition to it,

<sup>1</sup> On this subject cf. the earlier publications by the author: 'Anonymous Christians', *Theological Investigations* VI (London and Baltimore, 1969), pp. 390-398, and also 'Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church', *Theological Investigations* XII (London and New York, 1974), pp. 161-178.

<sup>2</sup> A. Röper, *Die anonymen Christen* (Mainz, 1963); but see also on this the critical review by H. Vorgrimler, 'Über die "anonymen Christen"', *Hochland* 56 (1963/64), pp. 363-364.

<sup>3</sup> K. Riesenhuber, 'Der anonyme Christ, nach K. Rahner', *Zeitschr. f. Kath. Theol.* 86 (1964), pp. 276-303. Riesenhuber attempts to give a comprehensive and co-ordinated presentation of all the various statements by Rahner on the question.

<sup>4</sup> H. Waldenfels, '... omnes homines vult salvos fieri...' (1 Tim. 2:4). De sententia P. Caroli Rahner S.J. circa voluntatem salvificam Dei universalis', *Shingaku Kenkyu* (Tokio, 1962), no. 12. Cf. also *idem*, 'Theologische Akkomodation', *Hochland* 58 (1965/66), pp. 189-204.

<sup>5</sup> cf. e.g. L. Elders, 'Die Taufe der Weltreligionen. Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie Karl Rahners', *Theol. u. Glaube* 55 (1965), pp. 124-131, and also H. Kruse, 'Die "anonymen Christen" exegetisch gesehen', *Münch. Theol. Zeitschrift* 18 (1967), pp. 2-29.

<sup>6</sup> See H. U. von Balthasar's observations in *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* (Einsiedeln, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> cf. H. de Lubac, *Paradoxe et Mystère de l'Église* (Paris, 1967), pp. 153-156.

while E. Schillebeeckx too expressed certain objections to it.<sup>8</sup> These references are intended not to provide any exhaustive bibliography on the controversy, but rather to make it clear that it will perhaps be worth while to present a few further observations on the theme. Admittedly in doing so we cannot have any intention of repeating in precise or explicit terms everything which has already been said on the subject. A somewhat random selection from among the various possible aspects must be permitted.

By way of preliminary it may be pointed out that a distinction should be drawn between the question of what constitutes the best possible terminology from every point of view, and the further question of the actual reality signified by the phrases 'anonymous Christian' or 'anonymous Christianity'. So far as the terminology is concerned I do not deny that this too has a certain importance, and that not every opinion to the effect that the terminology 'anonymous Christian' or 'anonymous Christianity' are to be rejected on the grounds that many find it misleading *ipso facto* or necessarily implies a rejection of the actual reality signified thereby. But anyone who holds that the reality signified by the above phrases, or the material content they point to are of such great importance that they must be condensed within a precisely formulated terminology of this kind in order to be used in other theological considerations must, if he merely rejects the above terminology, suggest some other terminology which according to his opinion is less misleading. Now this will probably prove very difficult. I know of no convincing suggestions which have been put forward in this respect. We may concede to de Lubac that with regard to the justification of the terms which have been called in question there is a certain distinction to be drawn between 'anonymous Christian' and 'anonymous Christianity'; that the term 'anonymous Christian' may more readily be admitted than that of 'anonymous Christianity'. Some therefore may prefer to avoid the term 'anonymous Christianity', while being ready to use the term 'anonymous Christian' etc. They can count on my agreement on this point. All I would draw their attention to in this respect is that 'Christianity' can have two meanings: not merely that of 'Christendom', i.e. the sum total of Christians, and so for practical purposes the Church, but also the meaning of the 'being Christian' of an individual Christian. In this sense, then, we can speak of 'anonymous Christianity' so long as we are willing to speak of an anonymous Christian. But this is as far as we shall go in concerning ourselves with the purely terminological problem.

<sup>8</sup> cf. E. Schillebeeckx, *Glaubensinterpretation* (Mainz, 1971), pp. 108f.

## THE REALITY OF THE 'ANONYMOUS CHRISTIAN'

The actual subject-matter with which we are properly and ultimately speaking concerned here is such that, as I believe, it neither can nor should be contested by any Catholic Christian or theologian. But two points are involved in this subject-matter:

There are men who stand outside the social unity of the Church or of the Christian Churches, who have not been reached by the explicitly Christian message, or at any rate not in such a way that their failure to embrace Christianity in any explicit sense signifies any serious personal fault in God's sight so far as they are concerned. At the same time, however, these same individuals stand in a positive and salvific relationship to God. In other words to put it in the usual theological terminology and in a somewhat abbreviated form, they are justified. They are living in the state of grace. Even those who at the level of their conscious thought interpret themselves as atheist may be numbered among such individuals, although the concept of the 'anonymous theist' who regards himself as an atheist and the concept of the 'anonymous Christian' are not identical.<sup>9</sup>

But the thesis of the 'anonymous Christian' includes a second point as well, and it is this that primarily and properly speaking gives it its importance and at the same time its difficulty. This individual who is justified even though he is a non-Christian is justified through the grace of Christ and through a faith, hope and love for God and mankind which are to be qualified as specifically Christian in a special sense, even though this triad, constituting the single way to salvation and possession of salvation, is something of which they are not objectively aware in the sense of having consciously explicated their specifically Christian dimension to themselves. Merely in passing it may be remarked that we might actually apply the term 'anonymous Christian' to every individual who, in virtue of God's universal will to save, and thereby in virtue of the 'supernatural existential',<sup>10</sup> is inescapably confronted with the offering of God's self-bestowal and is totally unable to escape from this situation. In other words according to this terminology absolutely every man is also an 'anonymous

<sup>9</sup> cf. also the author's article, 'Atheism and Implicit Christianity', *Theological Investigations* IX (London and New York, 1972), pp. 145-164.

<sup>10</sup> On these earlier ideas of the author's see 'Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace', *Theological Investigations* I (London, 1961), pp. 297-317, and also 'The Dignity and Freedom of Man', *Theological Investigations* II (London and Baltimore, 1963), pp. 235-263.

Christian'. But we prefer the terminology according to which that man is called an 'anonymous Christian' who on the one hand has *de facto* accepted of his freedom this gracious self-offering on God's part through faith, hope, and love, while on the other he is absolutely not yet a Christian at the social level (through baptism and membership of the Church) or in the sense of having consciously objectified his Christianity to himself in his own mind (by explicit Christian faith resulting from having hearkened to the explicit Christian message). We might therefore put it as follows: the 'anonymous Christian' in our sense of the term is the pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who lives in the state of Christ's grace through faith, hope and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is orientated in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ.

## THE THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF THE REALITY SIGNIFIED BY THE TERM 'ANONYMOUS CHRISTIAN'

So far as the first element is concerned I believe that there should be no room for doubt among Catholic theologians or Christians. There can be, and actually are, individuals who are justified in the grace of God, who attain to supernatural salvation in God's sight (and, moreover, to Christ as well), yet who do not belong to the Church or to Christendom as a visible historical reality as a result of having been touched by the preaching of the gospel in any concrete 'this worldly' sense at any point in their lives. No truly theological demonstration of this thesis can be supplied here from scripture or tradition. Such a demonstration would not be easy to make, because the optimism of universal salvation entailed in this thesis has only gradually become clear and asserted itself in the conscious faith of the Church. We can trace a course of development from the optimism concerning salvation for unbaptized catechumens in Ambrose, through the doctrine of the *baptismus fluminis* and the *votum ecclesiae* in the Middle Ages and at the Council of Trent, down to the explicit teaching in the writings of Pius XII to the effect that even a merely implicit *votum* for the Church and baptism can suffice. From this we can trace a further and more arduous course of development of the emergence of conscious faith in this regard which was even more difficult than the development of the conviction that there can be heretics and schismatics who are in good faith even outside the Church, and whose salvation cannot be doubted. Whatever may be the course of this development, whatever theological grounds there may be for justifying it, it can at all events be said that at least since the Second Vatican Council there can no longer be any room

to be justified and to attain to supernatural salvation even though at the level of their concrete 'this worldly' circumstances, and at the level of personal history and of the kerygmatic and institutional Church, they are not Christians at all. In this connection it should be noticed that this possibility is positively asserted by the Second Vatican Council. It is not merely that in presenting a theology of the necessity of the gospel and of baptism for salvation it has been added on as a negative point that in emphasizing this necessity of the gospel and of baptism we are nevertheless imposing no limits to the sovereign freedom of God's grace. The Second Vatican Council positively asserts that it is possible for the non-Christian to attain salvation, though at the same time it declares that such salvation is achieved in ways that are known to God alone. In a tacit but noteworthy correction to the officially received theology which had hitherto been more or less unanimous on this point, it was declared at the Second Vatican Council that atheists too are not excluded from this possibility of salvation, though here the distinctions between positive and negative atheism, between atheism of greater or lesser duration, usually accepted up to that point were not applied at the Second Vatican Council. The only necessary condition which is recognized here is the necessity of faithfulness and obedience to the individual's own personal conscience. This optimism concerning salvation appears to me one of the most noteworthy results of the Second Vatican Council. For when we consider the officially received theology concerning all these questions, which was more or less traditional right down to the Second Vatican Council, we can only wonder how few controversies arose during the Council with regard to these assertions of optimism concerning salvation, and wonder too at how little opposition the conservative wing of the Council brought to bear on this point, how all this took place without any setting of the stage or any great stir even though this doctrine marked a far more decisive phase in the development of the Church's conscious awareness of her faith than, for instance, the doctrine of collegiality in the Church, the relationship between scripture and tradition, the acceptance of the new exegesis etc.<sup>11</sup>

We now come to the second element which we have previously pointed

<sup>11</sup> On the whole cf. Conc. Vat. II, 'Nostra aetate' (Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions); 'Gaudium et spes' (Pastoral Constitution) (above all the first main section: The Church and Man's Calling), and also 'Ad gentes' (The Decree on the Missions).

time or the anonymous Christian as it is how many a person does not involve the belief that anyone can attain to justification and final salvation even without faith in a strictly theological sense merely because he does not act against his own moral conscience. It is true that the theory of a 'faith', a *fides lae dicta*, which at basis amounted merely to a recognition of God at the philosophical level was sufficient for justification was rejected by Innocent XI.<sup>12</sup> But this has certainly no very great theological importance for our present consideration, especially since the theory of A. Straub at the beginning of the present century concerning the justifying power of a readiness to believe in principle, a *fides virtualis*,<sup>13</sup> never incurred the official censure of the Church. But both in Pius XII's declaration against the rigorism of Feeney<sup>14</sup> and in the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council it is after all clearly assumed that even in these cases of a justified pagan a *fides supernaturalis* is necessary. What is not stated in these official doctrinal declarations is how a truly supernatural faith of this kind in the strictly theological sense can come to be in the cases which concern us here. In the document of the Second Vatican Council, 'Ad gentes' No. 7, it is stated (albeit merely in an aside) that God can bring men who are ignorant of the gospel through no fault of their own to faith by ways which he knows, and that without this faith it is impossible to be pleasing to him. And in this formula what we chiefly sense is a scepticism as to whether it is possible at all, even in the most formal way, to find an answer to the question of how such a faith could ever be present in a man when this man has no contact whatever with the gospel. This sense of scepticism also finds expression in a further document of the Second Vatican Council, 'Gaudium et Spes', and moreover in almost the same words (No. 22). This then is concerned with finding the answer to the question of *how* it is possible apart from the preaching of the gospel for a true and supernatural faith to be present in a 'pagan' of this kind, i.e. an assent to God as he imparts himself in freedom and in a way which transcends any certainty which the world can offer. But the fact that we cannot find the answer to this question should not prevent the theologian from pondering it more deeply. For if he simply renounces any attempt to find an answer at all however formal, then

<sup>12</sup> cf. DS<sup>94</sup> 2123.

<sup>13</sup> See A. Straub, *De analyxi fidei* (Innsbruck, 1922). Some of the studies here published go very far back in time.

<sup>14</sup> DS<sup>94</sup> 3872.

either the universality of God's will to save towards non-Christian humanity or the necessity of personal faith for this becomes incredible. Yet we cannot invoke either a natural knowledge of God or a primitive and ultimate kind of revelation to answer this question, for such answers will fail to solve it. The first course has already been rejected by Innocent XI and Pius XII as well as by the declarations of the Second Vatican Council. With regard to the second course, i.e. the invoking of a primitive and ultimate revelation, the way in which this has customarily been presented hitherto is in the form of a handing down of an original revelation of this kind from paradisaal sources. Nowadays this is impossible both because of the findings of modern palaeontology and anthropology and also because of the findings of modern exegesis, which regards the narrative of Genesis neither as an eye-witness account of God himself as having participated in the events concerned nor simply as a record that has been transmitted through the centuries of human history. But the converse can be stated. The more we can make intelligible the possibility of a personal faith even in a 'pagan', and moreover on the basis of the normal data of theology as self-evident in other contexts, and so without any supplementary arguments constructed arbitrarily, such as have not infrequently been adduced in the past (special enlightenment at death etc.), the better can the doctrine of the possibility of justification and salvation for a 'pagan' be fitted into the totality of the Christian faith, and the clearer and more intelligible too will the doctrine become of a real, effective, and infallapartian universal will to save on God's part. Admittedly any such theology of the possibility of a true and saving faith even in the 'pagan' must be so formulated as to avoid obscuring the importance of an explicit Christianity, with its concomitants of gospel and Church, and the necessity of the missionary preaching of this Christianity to all nations and all men. Even when all this is successfully achieved one fact remains, so I believe, concerning the breakthrough of this optimism concerning salvation for all men which (so far as our present question goes) can be prevented only by the grave personal guilt of the individual, and which at the same time regards all salvation, wherever it is present, as specifically Christian. This optimism with regard to salvation remains one of the most astonishing phenomena in the development of the Church's conscious awareness of her faith in this development as it applies to the secular and non-Christian world, the awareness of the difference between saving history as a whole and the history of explicit Christianity and of the Church. For it is true that we must not say that the Old or the New Testament simply rule out any such optimistic interpretation of universal

salvation, which in the power of the Holy Spirit can hope to find a near brother even in one who is apparently most far removed. But we shall not be able to say either that this development of the conscious awareness of faith is already very clearly set forth in the New Testament or that it does not have to overcome very great obstacles which are inherent in the New Testament statements concerning the necessity of salvation coming through the gospel which is preached in its power.

#### HOW COULD IT BE POSSIBLE FOR THERE TO BE AN 'ANONYMOUS CHRISTIAN'?

Now how can we conceive of this possibility of faith in the 'pagan'? In attempting – nothing more than an attempt is intended – to answer this question some anthropological insights may surely be taken as given which should be explained and established more fully elsewhere: the difference and the unity between objective knowledge and that which is known on the one hand, and a non-objective, non-thematic awareness and the reality thus known on the other – in other words between 'this worldly' knowledge and transcendental knowledge, between that which is expressed in conceptual form and the further levels of significance not consciously adverted to of a given statement, between the material object and an *a priori* formal object concomitantly present with the capacity to know, between the object of knowledge and the further perspectives of knowledge – or whatever name we may choose to apply to the distinction we are seeking to draw, though in this it remains unimportant for our present purposes whether the concepts we have adduced historically speaking, and in the application of them here intended, mean precisely the same, or whether further and more precise distinctions should be introduced into them in their turn.<sup>15</sup> For our present purposes what we are chiefly concerned with is of course the distinction between the pairs of concepts we have mentioned. Yet it is not disputed that between them there always remains also a certain unity (not identity!). That which is capable of being expressed in 'this worldly' categories mediates the transcendental and *e converso*, although this mutually conditioning relationship is itself to be thought of not as a fixed entity, but rather as having a history of its own so that this relationship and its history are quite incapable of being expressed thematically in any full sense. If we take these

<sup>15</sup> On these observations by the author cf. 'Thomas Aquinas on Truth', *Theological Investigations* XIII, and the basic studies: *Geist in Welt* (Munich, 3rd ed., 1964) and *Hörer des Wortes* (Munich, 2nd ed., 1965).

concepts of formal anthropology as read the theory of the possibility of personal faith in a 'pagan' makes two assumptions: (1) The supernatural grace of faith and justification offered by God to men does not need to be conceived of as an isolated intervention on God's part at a particular point in a world which is itself profane. On the contrary it can perfectly well be interpreted on the basis of God's universal will to save as a grace which, as offered (!), is a constantly present existential of the creature endowed with spiritual faculties and of the world in general, which orientates these to the immediacy of God as their final end, though of course in saying this the question still remains wholly open of whether an individual freely gives himself to, or alternatively rejects, this existential which constitutes the innermost dynamism of his being and its history, an existential which is and remains continually present.<sup>16</sup> God's universal will to save objectifies itself in that communication of himself which we call grace. It does this effectively at all times and in all places in the form of the offering and the enabling power of acting in a way that leads to salvation. And even though it is unmerited and 'supernatural' in character, it constitutes the innermost *entelechia* and dynamism of the world considered as the historical dimension of the creature endowed with spiritual faculties. It does not need to be consciously and objectively known as a dynamism of this kind, and even without such knowledge it is still present. (2) This grace constantly implanted in the nature of the creature and the historical dimension belonging to it as the dynamism and finalization of the history of man is, however, something of which man is *aware* in the manner in which such a reality does impinge upon human awareness. This awareness does not *ipso facto* or necessarily imply an objective awareness; it is present in the *a priori* formal objects, in the further levels of significance in the spiritual and intentional capacities of knowledge and freedom. Whether man explicitly recognizes it or not, whether he can or cannot reflect upon it in itself and in isolation, man is, in virtue of the grace offered him and implanted in him as his freedom in the mode of a formal object and of a spiritual perspective of an *a priori* kind, orientated towards the immediacy of God as his final end.<sup>17</sup> He brings his spiritual life to its fulness in knowledge and freedom in such a way that God in himself constitutes the ultimate point of orientation of his whole historical development in knowledge and freedom, and that too not as the God of metaphysical knowledge, as the God of infinite remoteness, but as the

<sup>16</sup> cf. n. 10.

<sup>17</sup> On this cf. the author's article, 'Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace, *Theological Investigations* I (London, 1961), pp. 297-317.

God who in himself and of himself, in his own unique reality and sovereignty, constitutes the goal, as the God of eternal life.

This orientation of the spiritual dynamism of man towards the immediacy of God, which is both known and unknown, is, it is true, in order to be known at all (which does not mean reflected upon as an object or capable of being adequately reflected upon by the individual) mediated through the realities of his world assignable to 'this worldly' categories. But this mediation does not necessarily need to be an explicit object of revelation. All those forms of mediation belonging to the dimension of 'this worldly' categories are sufficient for this which confront the individual in himself as a subject endowed with intellect and freedom. We are suggesting that grace brings about a change of awareness through a new *a priori* formal object, even though this change of awareness cannot be reflected upon directly or certainly by the individual as such. Now this is not a thesis discovered *ad hoc*, but a view which has always been upheld in Thomist theology even though hitherto it has probably hardly been applied to our present question – simply because we have regarded the prevenient and elevating grace too much as an isolated event taking place at a particular point, and only under specific circumstances. But if we regard the self-communication of God (considered as that which is offered to man in his freedom) as an abiding existential of the creature endowed with spiritual faculties, and thereby as the innermost dynamism of the world in general, then, assuming the validity of the above-mentioned Thomist thesis, it is clear from the outset that the total process by which man brings his intellectual nature to its fulness, in which he comes to be in act as spiritual and in his totality, is orientated by grace towards the immediacy of God in a dimension of *a priori* awareness. On any right understanding of the relationship between the dimension of transcendental *a priori* and that of categorical historicity in man it is clear that this supernaturally elevated transcendentality of man, of which he is aware but which is not *ipso facto* known in itself as an object, does not have a special history apart, or does not persist in any sense in a non-historical state of fixity, but rather has a history of its own within the concrete history of the individual as its innermost form and dynamism in a manner similar to that of logic, which has its initial history not in the history of the logic that is the subject of conscious philosophical reflection, but in the history of the active spirit of man himself as he shapes his world.

In the light of this we can then go on to say that the total history of mankind is nothing else than the historical mediation, in terms of 'historical' and 'this-worldly' categories, of the supernaturally elevated spirituality



of man to man himself. And at that stage at which this history comes explicitly to exhibit this supernatural dynamism, so that its presence is consciously recognized within the history – at that stage it is revelation history and the history of faith. But this is a point which cannot be entered into in any more precise detail here. What can on any showing be said, however, is this: this grace-given elevation of the transcendentality of man, i.e. the orientation of this to the immediacy of God as its final end, gives reality to the concept of revelation already at the stage of an *a priori* awareness. And it does this even though this awareness (the supernatural formal object, as the Thomist would say) has not yet been objectively apprehended at the level of conscious thought or expressed in words. And when man of his freedom accepts himself together with this *a priori* awareness which is already revelation, then that is present which can in the true and proper sense be called faith, even though this faith has not yet been objectively explicated or conceptualized as the absolute openness of man to the immediacy of God in his act of self-imparting. Yet this *a priori* awareness of man (called revelation) is always accepted in faith wherever and whenever an individual in unreserved faithfulness to his own moral conscience accepts himself in freedom as he is, and so too in the as yet unrecognizable implications of the dynamism underlying the movement of his own spirit. It is only in the light of this that we can achieve a full theological understanding of what the Second Vatican Council says in 'Lumen Gentium' No. 16: 'Those also can attain to everlasting 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.' A point expressly to be noticed here is that in the following sentence this doctrine is declared to apply also to those who are inculpable atheists. And the same point is likewise made in 'Gaudium et Spes'.

On a first simple reading of this declaration we might receive the impression that what the 'pagan' is being promised here in the statement concerning the fulfilment of the dictates of conscience is a salvation which comes to be even without faith. Moreover, the emphasis on divine grace, by means of which alone obedience to the dictates of conscience can be achieved, still does nothing of itself to alter this impression. Yet salvation of this kind without true faith is ruled out by the declaration of Pius XII and the Missionary Decree of the Second Vatican Council, as we have already mentioned above.

This grace, therefore, must produce faith, and that too even in cases

where no knowledge of the gospel exists. It follows that theology has an obligation to explain how such a faith is conceivable in the conditions described. We have attempted to give such an explanation and the theological data we have adduced for this purpose are only such as are already recognized in other contexts: the universal will of God to save, the supernatural specification of man entailed in this and constantly present in him, in virtue of which God's act of self-communication implanted in the innermost being of man (as offered to his freedom), that *a priori* transcendental change of awareness which is concomitantly given with this grace, and which is present even when it is not yet or not at all consciously adverted to. Anyone who rejects this theory of a possible faith in God as revealing himself and communicating himself, on whatever grounds, then incurs the task as a Catholic theologian of explaining in other ways how true supernatural faith in revelation can be present in an individual without any contact with the explicit preaching of the gospel. For the fact that such a thing is possible is explicitly declared in the official doctrinal statements of the Church cited above, even though they themselves refrain from making any theological declaration on this fact.

#### FURTHER IMPLICATIONS OF A THESIS

The theory of the 'anonymous Christian', therefore, states (though we do not insist upon the term 'anonymous Christian') that even outside the Christian body there are individuals – and they are to be found even in the ranks of atheists – who are justified by God's grace and possess the Holy Spirit. The theory further states that the difference between this state of salvation and that of those who are Christians in an explicit sense is not such that these 'pagans' are acceptable in God's sight even without any true faith (together with hope and love) as it were in virtue of a merely natural morality which they possess, whereas the Christians and only they achieve their justification through a faith in salvation. On the contrary the theory ascribes to these justified pagans also a real, albeit unexplicated or, if we like to put it so, rudimentary faith. This is of course not to deny that this faith as it exists in the pagan is properly speaking designed to follow its own inherent dynamism in such a way as to develop into that faith which is objectified and articulated through the gospel, that faith which we simply call the Christian faith. The seed has no right to seek not to grow into a plant. But the fact that it is not yet developed into a plant is no reason for refusing to give the name which we give to the plant destined to grow from it to the seed as well.

It is possible, then, to envisage a man who is in possession of that self-imparting of God called grace as the innermost heart and centre of his existence, one who has accepted this in unreserved faithfulness to his own conscience, one who is thereby constituted as a believer in a form which, while it is not objectified in words, is nonetheless real, a man, in other words, who even as a 'pagan' already possesses the blessing of salvation, that blessing which ultimately speaking is the sole point of concern for Christianity together with the gospel belonging to it and all its institutions, and in relation to which everything else is merely a means, a historical objectification, a sacramental sign, a social manifestation. Now if this is true, then I cannot see why we should not call such a man an anonymous Christian, seeing that as Catholic theologians we may not doubt that such men both can and actually do exist. For after all he does possess, even though in a way hidden to himself and to others, that which constitutes the essence of what it is to be a Christian: the grace of God which is laid hold of in faith. If we are unwilling to go on from this, and to speak of an anonymous *Christianity* then I will raise no protest against this refusal. All that is involved here is simply a question of what constitutes the terminology that best suits the purpose and so a question of judgement on which I have no fixed opinion whatever. Admittedly I do regard the term 'anonymous Christian' as inescapable so long as no one suggests a better term to me.

#### PERSPECTIVES

Obviously many further questions would still remain to be treated which cannot be resolved here. We should have to enquire how all those new perspectives of saving history and the history of faith entailed in the theory we have put forward are to be reconciled with the viewpoint from which the New Testament regards the process by which salvation is gained and also saving history itself, albeit with very notable variations. A further point which should be discussed is the question already mentioned above as to the meaning and necessity of the mission of Christianity, a question in the light of which it is very often believed that this theory should be rejected. Admittedly in this connection there is actually a particular example to be mentioned: a Japanese who is a student chaplain in Japan has told me that the theory put forward here constitutes the indispensable condition for him such that it is only on this condition that he can perform his missionary work, precisely because he can then appeal to the anonymous Christian in the pagan and not simply seek to indoc-

trinate him with a teaching *ab externo*. A further question which would have to be resolved is what aspects (on the basis of the theory we have put forward) are brought to light for the appraisal of the non-Christian religions, even though this question cannot be answered *solely* on the basis of the theory of the anonymous Christian. This theory, therefore, remains ultimately speaking neutral in relation even to such controversies as have, for instance, very recently arisen between Schleier and Seckler.<sup>18</sup>

The question might be raised of whether a new conception of the primordial revelation cannot be developed precisely in the light of the theory put forward here, a conception which avoids those elements which are either improbable or impossible from an anthropological and historical point of view, yet which are entailed in the usual conception of the primordial revelation. It is obvious that the assumptions, in terms of existential ontology which this theory works with call for further clarification and explanation. A distinction is drawn between two factors: an original event of revelation consisting in the self-communication of God as addressed to all in virtue of his universal will to save and taking place at a preconceptual level in the roots of man's spiritual faculties on the one hand, and the objectification at the historical and conceptual level of this revelatory self-communication of God in that which we call revelation and the history of revelation in a more normal sense on the other. This distinction, which it has been necessary to draw here, could be the occasion of fruitful considerations for many other problems of theology. But, as has been said, these and many other points cannot be discussed any further in the present context. The man of today is first and foremost a man who feels himself at one (at that point at which he truly achieves the fullness of self-realization) with mankind as a whole. For all his harsh experiences of what it is to be a historical being and of history itself, whenever it is the ultimate in man, man as a whole and as final and definitive that is in

<sup>18</sup> Both authors have stated their respective positions on the problems involved several times. Cf. H. R. Schleier, *Die Religionen als Thema der Theologie*, *Questions Disputatae* 22 (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1964) and the review of this work: M. Seckler, 'Eine Theologie der Religionen', *Hochland* 57 (1964/65), pp. 588-590. But see also H. R. Schleier, 'Einige Thesen zum Selbstverständnis der Theologie angesichts der Religionen', *Gott in Welt* II (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1964), pp. 306-316 and *Colloquium Salutis - Christen und Nichtchristen heute* (Cologne, 1965). On the other hand cf. M. Seckler, 'Das Heil der Nicht-evangelisierten in thomistischer Sicht', *Theol. Quart. Schrift.* 140 (1960), pp. 38-69, and also 'Nichtchristen III. Systematisch', *HTKG* II (Munich, 1963), pp. 239-242 and 'Sind Religionen Heilswege?', *StZ* 186 (1970), pp. 187-194. A. Darlap has presented a general survey on the whole area of 'the Theology of Religions' in *Sacramentum Mundi* V (London and New York, 1970), pp. 284-287.



question, he feels himself at one with all. He does not seek any heaven from which some other man is excluded from the outset. If at the same time he still seeks to uphold nowadays the claims of Christianity to be absolute, its universal significance for each and for all, if he wills to recognize, and as a Christian must recognize a *single* meaning and a *single* dynamism running through the whole history of mankind, then he must simply have a single answer as to how and in what way he can recognize in every one of his fellows a brother in the sense in which Christianity recognizes every individual as a brother, a sense, that is, which is not merely humanist but truly Christian. There must be a Christian theory to account for the fact that every individual who does not in any absolute or ultimate sense act against his own conscience can say and does say in faith, hope, and love, Abba within his own spirit, and is on these grounds in all truth a brother to Christians in God's sight. This is what the theory of the anonymous Christian seeks to say, and, in so far as it is valid, what it implies.

## 18

### THE CHURCH'S COMMISSION TO BRING SALVATION AND THE HUMANIZATION OF THE WORLD

#### 'HORIZONTALISM' IN CHRISTIANITY AND IN THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

There have always been heresies which threaten Christianity, the Christian life, and a right understanding of the Church's task. They constitute a danger which has always accompanied the earthly life of faith and of the Church. In earlier times such heresies emerged, as the word 'heresy' = 'division' implies, within the Church herself, and were chiefly related to specific and particular points of Christian doctrine and Christian life with the result that even at the conceptual level it was customary to distinguish heresy from apostasy, meaning a falling away from Christianity as a whole. Today Christianity and the Church are threatened by a form of teaching and a way of life which, while they have indeed emerged from the Church, are far from being explicitly presented as a rejection of Christianity or as seeking to draw men out of the Church, and yet which in reality already imply in a true sense something far more than heresy. For in reality they take a course which leads to an elimination of Christianity. In other words they constitute that which, in the traditional terminology, should be called apostasy. In this connection one question which does of course remain quite open is that of the subjective dispositions of those who uphold such tendencies in the doctrine and life of the Church. We mean here the view that that which constitutes the true essence of Christianity, the true heart and centre which alone is signified in all its doctrines, the true task of the Church, consists in something which can simply be called 'love of neighbour' or (because this term has perhaps too individualistic or pietistic a ring for the upholders of this movement) 'commitment at the level of social politics and criticism of society', 'responsibility for the world'. This tendency has already been designated by the term pure 'horizontalism'.