

THE CLAIMS OF CHRISTIANITY IN RELATION TO OTHER RELIGIONS: A QUESTION OF TRUTH AND TOLERANCE

David-Mary ODUNSI

PREFATORY REMARKS

In a world that is not only characterised by rich varieties but has even canonized relativism and pluralism, any absolute claim is sure to meet with immediate rejection from most quarters. This becomes doubly the case in metaphysical and extra-sensory realities like religion where God and eternal salvation are constants, yet where our most certain knowledge is not empirically verifiable but rests on faith. It thus appears “reasonable and gentlemanly” in such matters to entertain and accept varieties of conflicting views based on the individual freedom of conscience. Christianity is not only a “player” in this whole drama, but a protagonist alongside two other proselytizing religions (Judaism and Islam); and its claim has not seized to generate hot debates with far-reaching practical consequences.

The “reasonable and gentlemanly” trend then is to deny any claim to truth in matters of religion and confine religion to the realm of the relative and subjective. In such a scenario, the parable of the “blind men and the elephant” finds application

and immediate acceptance. God, it is said, is like an elephant while the various world religions are like the six men born blind in the parable. Once, an Indian king brought an elephant and had each of the blind men in the town to touch and feel various parts of it. He then asked them to describe what the elephant looks like. According to what each had felt of the elephant, one said the elephant is like a long rope, another said it is like a pillar, yet another said it is like a mortar and so on. This caused argument and degenerated into conflict among them, each claiming that his own description of the elephant is the correct one. The conflict among world religions is comparable to this parable.¹

The result is that the question of truth is removed from religion. Even among Christian theologians, the scholastic slogan “*Quodenim recipitur in aliquot recipitur in eo secundum modum recipientis*” (Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver) is marshalled in support of religious indifferentism and pluralism; - we only have partial understandings of God and no one religion can claim to be better or superior in this regard. Bringing the question of truth and falsehood into religion is then quickly labelled as religious fundamentalism as though God and truth are incompatible variables. It is this idea and all it has given birth to that we wish to dislodge in this paper, holding instead that religious indifferentism which removes objective truth from religion does more harm than good and can only lead to nihilism and secularism as the world is presently witnessing on a large scale. On the other hand, objectively coming to terms with the truth claims of religions does not necessarily have to lead into conflicts, but shows us the path to tolerance and dialogue.

METHOD OF APPROACH

Our approach in this work shall be theologically expository and philosophically objective. Beginning with the historical Jesus Christ who is the “Author and Finisher” of the Christian Faith (Heb. 12:2), we shall move to the legacy he left behind from which the Christian Church makes her claims that constitute subjects of controversial debates both inter-ecclesial and extra-ecclesial. Before presenting our new

approach to the on-going discussion, we shall give a summary of the official Church position on the matter which is mostly a building of bridges to achieve compromise on thorny issues even while holding firmly to her convictions.

Our contribution begins with the clarification of the main object and interest in the debate (Necessary Clarifications); and then, proceeds from our common human nature and its fundamental cravings which religion offers to satisfy (*Summum Bonum*). From here, all religions that make universal and truth claims on the matter are asked to present their credentials which shall be assessed with the honesty and objectivity it demands. While still “*en route*”, religious pluralism is endorsed (One God, Many Religions) pending the result of the whole enterprise. Our client in this debate is Christianity whose claim we shall try to justify in four strands before we draw the curtain of the whole discourse.

THE MESSAGE AND CLAIMS OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Christianity has always been in opposition to other existing religious traditions of the world. Right from its infancy, its position has been in opposition to the central beliefs of the Jewish religion. Beginning with the message and claims of the historical Jesus Christ himself; the manner and content of his teachings are very much unlike that of his contemporaries and the prophets of old which make reference to the Lord (“Thus says the Lord...”) and other human authorities, they rather rest on his own authority, which could even upturn the existing status quo (cf. Matt. 5:21-48).² He taught the people with authority, and not like their own scribes (Mark 1:27; Luke 4:36). As to the content of his teachings, they are not clannish or tribal, parochial or myopic, but have universal applications and enduring values. What more, he forgave sins and made himself the only true mediator of salvation, predicating eternal happiness with God on association with himself as the only way to the Father in heaven (John 14:6; 3:13-18; 10:28), all to the displeasure of the Jewish leaders and authority. His teaching and message are thus valid for all people at all times and places; with no

preference for the Jews in which his Jewish brethren had been glorying.

We must also mention his many miracles³ which explained and confirmed his mission; which fulfilled the Old Testament prophesies; and also revealed his divinity. Many of these often did not go well with the Jewish authorities and were often the cause of their enmity with him even to the point of persecution. The healing of the woman bent double (cf. Luke 13:10-17) and of the blind man in Jerusalem (cf. John 9:1-8) which in subsequent verses (13-34) the Pharisees undertook to investigate, were typical examples of these. Lastly, we talk of his claim to divinity by words and actions. More than anything else, this was what stirred the people's fury against him and led to his death. See especially what happened after the raising of Lazarus (cf. John 11:45-57); his claim of equality with God and their mutual indwelling (cf. John 10:22-40); his claim to pre-existence and the attribution to himself of God's own name "I AM" (John 8:48-59). He equally identified himself with God and addresses God as his very own Father (John 10:30; Matt 11:27; 7:21; 11:30; Lk. 2:49; John 10:38; 14:2; 21-23; 15:15); then, the prophesy about his own resurrection (cf. Luke 19:45-20:8; John 2:13-22).

As he said, Jesus died and on the third day, rose again from the dead; and for forty days he was seen appearing to his disciples during which he also gave them "The Great Commission" to preach the Gospel everywhere and make all men and women his disciples (cf. Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:19-23); then, he ascended into heaven as his disciples gazed up looking (cf. Acts 1:9-11). Ten days afterwards, he sent the Holy Spirit as he promised to inaugurate the Church he founded (cf. Eph. 2:19-20) to continue his salvific mission. The Church has since been proclaiming the message of Christ and mediating to men and women in every age the salvation he won for us.

Two Contentious Claims Of Christianity

Stemming from the person and message of Jesus Christ and the Great Commission she received from the Lord, the Church feels bound in successive ages to continue the mission

of Christ on earth with the same authority and audacity. And while this has found acceptance by some, it has been rejected and opposed by others. St. Augustine seemed to have captured this contentious scenario that necessarily arise from the universal claims of Christianity: “The salvation which belongs to this religion (Christianity), the only true religion through which alone true salvation is truthfully promised, was never wanting to anyone who was worthy of it; and anyone to whom it was wanting was not worthy of it. From the beginning of human propagation to the end He is preached to the reward of some and to the judgment of others”⁴. Without having to dive into the tendentious waters of the debates and the various turns these have taken in various quarters, (books and articles abound in great number treating it in more or less comprehensive details)⁵ we simply present here two central beliefs of Christianity which seem to embosom its universal and absolute claims on the one hand, and mostly stir contention and on-going debate, on the other hand.

THE UNITY AND TRINITY OF GOD

We begin with the Creed (The Apostles' Creed), the Christians' formal Profession of Faith. Divided into twelve articles, the first article of the Creed reads “**I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth**”. We must concede that virtually all that this article proposes for belief are accepted by the greatest religious traditions of the world. All religions especially Judaism, Christianity, Islam; African Traditional Religions and most Eastern Religions believe in one God who is the Supreme Being and is the “Creator of heaven and earth”. This much, we have in common. But with the second article of the Creed which states “**And (I believe) in Jesus Christ, his only son, our lord**”, Christianity parts ways with them as the article directly strikes at the chief distinction of the Christian Religion, that is, Jesus Christ, from whom believers and the religion itself get their names (cf. Acts 11:26; Jer. 14:9). With the confession of Jesus Christ as the only Son of God and as “Our Lord”, the Creed introduces our belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, and by concomitant, our belief in the Blessed Trinity.

Yes, God exists; reason and revelation are univocal on this point, and religious experiences of over ten millennia of human existence only serve to perpetuate and transmit this as a cultural package from one generation to another. But in addition to this simple theistic confession, Christianity emphasizes the Unity and Trinity of God and proclaims it as its “central mystery of faith”;⁶ - a mystery being a revealed truth which surpasses human understanding however the attempt is and must be made. In other words, we do not only believe in One God, we also believe that in this one God, there are three persons - God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father is the first Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Son is the second Person, and the Holy Spirit is the third Person. The three persons do not share the divine essence but each possesses it in full so that we do not have three gods or three Gods but only one God. While the Father is unbegotten, the Son is generated eternally by the Father by way of knowledge and the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son by way of love.⁷

As such, the Christian God is one in essence and three in persons, co-equal and co-eternal in majesty. For, “so sure is the equality in this Trinity, that not only is the Father not greater than the Son in what touches upon divinity, but neither can the Father and the Son together be anything greater than the Holy Spirit, nor can anyone which so ever of the persons be anything less than the Trinity itself”.⁸ Hence, in the Trinity, it is a case of identity of nature (the divine nature, the one Godhead), equality of perfection (of greatness and qualities), and trinity of persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). The baptismal formula given by Christ himself is a direct pointer to this: “Go ye and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the **name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**” (Matt.28:19).⁹

JESUS CHRIST, THE REDEEMER AND SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD

Now, though all the activities of God *ad extra* (outside of Himself upon the created universe) are common to the three divine persons, the Church, following the Scriptures and the Fathers, ascribes or technically puts, “appropriates”¹⁰ certain

streams of works and attributes to each of the three divine persons. Hence, power and creation are appropriated to the Father, wisdom and redemption to the Son, and goodness and sanctification to the Holy Spirit. In this appropriation of works and attributes, Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, is the Redeemer (and Saviour) of the world. Ordinarily, redemption means getting something back which perhaps has been lost or degraded in part or in whole. In this theological context, it refers to: the Fall of humanity, the masterpiece of God's creation (Ps. 8:6-7; Wis. 2:23) as a result of the devil's temptation (Gen. 3:1-7), which as a result makes the whole creation to be subjected to decay and conversely makes creation hostile to humanity (Gen. 3:17-18; Rom. 8:22-23); and the restoration of the human race to its original and even greater dignity (2Pet. 1:4) by God's bounteous initiative (Gen. 3:15), and its actualization (Rom. 5:12-14, 18-21; John 1:16-17).¹¹

From the above, there is an important truth that we must get uncompromisingly, namely, that **Jesus is the Redeemer, the Saviour, not only of the Jews or of the Jews and Christians alone, but of the whole world, of the whole of humanity** of all those who have died in the past, of all those who live at present, and of all those who will still come in the future. **Such a bold and universal claim obviously leaves behind it serious questions on the truth and salvific value of other religions; and with this**, streams of questions naturally begin to rise in our minds. From the above two doctrines come the contentious claims of Christianity.

That God is one is not disputed by the great religions of the world, but that God is “three in one or one in three” is a serious bone of contention, especially as one of the three divine persons is said to be the Father, and one, the Son, yet without a mother - the third divine person being the Holy Spirit. To the Jews and Muslims, this is totally unacceptable. What more, despite this “natural illogicality”, the three divine persons are said to be equal. The debate is even more contentious on the soteriological platform. For, in matters of salvation, which of course flows from faith in God who alone can grant it, Christianity has a second bold claim that generates more dust in inter-religious discourse and constitute theological

conundrum both to Christian thinkers and non-Christians alike, namely, that in Jesus alone is eternal salvation to be found and no one is saved except through him. This is a two-in-one claim one relating to Jesus Christ, the other relating to the Church he founded. We acknowledge that a lot has been done and is being done by theologians, schools of thought and authoritative inter-religious bodies to achieve some compromise and close up the gap between these claims of Christianity and the positions of other religions; it is the official position of the Church which continues to give direction to Christians' participation in the on-going discussion that is our thrust in the next section.

THE RESPONSE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The Christian Church is not unaware of the arguments and controversies generated by its claims and the practical consequences from within and outside the Church. She therefore has to respond and keep on responding as the situation takes new turns.

THE NEW TESTAMENT UP TO THE 5TH CENTURY

With all the data of the historical reality of Jesus Christ, the Apostolic Church felt commissioned to continue his mission and message on earth against all odds. And so, the early Christians simply damned all the consequences to proclaim without equivocation the divinity and messiahship of Jesus Christ, together with the unicity of the salvation offered in him. Hence, "There is only one God and there is only one mediator between God and man the human race, the man Jesus Christ who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5-6). For this reason, there is no name given us under heaven by which we can be saved except the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12). Arrested, flogged and warned; set before religious and political authorities; stoned to death, imprisoned, slayed by the sword and crucified; their stance remains:

What will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or
famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?.. In
all these things, we conquer overwhelmingly
through him who loved us. For I am convinced

that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor present things nor future things nor powers nor heights nor depth nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8: 35-39).

It was to defend and clarify certain details in this same faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ that the Church held her First and Second Ecumenical Councils at Nicea in 325 A.D. and at Constantinople in 381 A.D. during which the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed was formulated.¹² The same attitude and proclamation continued when the Church spread through most parts of the Roman Empire. Christianity was tagged “*religio illicita*” (Illicit religion) and its adherents punished by all forms of ignominious death not excluding feeding them to the wild beasts and crucifixion. Yet, in all these, the Empire could not overcome Christianity and its message of salvation; it was rather the Empire that eventually gave way to Christianity to flourish.

THE MEDIEVAL TO THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Down into the medieval period, the Church felt bound to proclaim the divinity of Jesus Christ and the salvation he offers to all and deposited in the Church he founded. Especially through Origen, St Augustine, and St. Fulgence of Ruspe, the Medieval Church inherited the same faith which then became encapsulated in the saying “*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” (Outside the Church there is no salvation).¹³ This has continued to be the position of the Church ever since, though with increasingly broader understanding of the concept of “the Church” and with respect for the individual freedom of conscience (religious freedom).

The Second Ecumenical Council of Nicea, (787 A.D) for instance, states in its eighth canon that only those Jews who sincerely wish to convert into Christianity should be allowed into the Church, otherwise, they should be allowed to “be Hebrews openly, according to their own religion”.¹⁴ The Council of Florence (1431-1445) restates the Church's faith on the salvation offered in Jesus Christ especially in its Decree for the Copts (1442). It exposes the order of salvation in a sort of syllogism as follows: Jesus Christ is the final

revelation of God; his mission is entrusted to the Church; thus separation from this church means separation from Christ and hence, loss of salvation.¹⁵ Besides the explicit condemnation of religious indifferentism by: Leo XII (in his Encyclical Letter *Ubi Primum* of 1824); Gregory XVI (in *Mirari Vos Arbitramur* of 1832) and Pius IX (in *Qui Pluribus* of 1846, *Singulari Quadam* of 1854 and *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore* of 1863 and the Syllabus of Errors of 1864); Pius IX's Allocution *Singulari Quadam* acknowledges that individuals outside the Church may simply be in ignorance of the truth through no fault of theirs and so “are not subject to any guilt in this matter before the eyes of the Lord”. Furthermore, we are reminded not to bear any enmity against those outside the Church. “On the contrary, if they are poor or sick or afflicted by any other evils, let the children of the Church endeavour to succor and help them with all the services of Christian love”.¹⁶

FROM 1950 TILL DATE

Richard McBrien has beautifully summarised major recent documents of the Magisterium on the relation of the Christian Church to other religions.¹⁷ The First Plenary Council of India (1950) for instance, rejects religious indifferentism and positively acknowledges the spiritual value of other religions even while stating the uncompromising truth of Christianity:

We acknowledge that there is truth and goodness outside the Christian religion, for God has not left the nations without a witness to God, and the human soul is naturally drawn towards the one true God... But the inadequacy of all non-Christian religions is principally derived from this, that Christ being constituted the one Mediator between God and humankind, there is no salvation by any other name.¹⁸

And, in not less than five of its documents, i.e *Lumen Gentium* (1964), *Nostra Aetate* (1965), *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965), *Ad Gentes Divinitus* (1965) and *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), Vatican Council II takes a positive stand and acknowledges the salvific value of other religions which it recognizes as participating in the Unique Mediatorship of Jesus Christ and as a result of the all-pervading workings of the grace of the

Holy Spirit (John 3:8). They are thus true human responses to God's self-communication and so, can really be true preparation for the Gospel of Christ. Christians are thus called to maintain a wholly positive attitude towards non-Christian religions: to reject nothing of truth, goodness and holiness found in them even when they differ from our own; to eschew discrimination based on sex, creed and race; to give room for freedom of conscience, and to embrace inter-religious dialogue in theory and practice.¹⁹ Similar sentiment is echoed in Pope Paul VI's *Ecclesiam Suam* of 1964:

There is one true religion, the Christian religion, and we hope that all who seek God and adore Him will come to acknowledge this... Yet, we do nevertheless, acknowledge with respect the spiritual and moral values of various non-Christian religions, for we desire to join with them in promoting and defending common ideals in the sphere of religious liberty, human solidarity, teaching and education, social welfare and civil order.²⁰

The Secretariat For Dialogue with Other Religions issued its 'Guidelines for a Dialogue between Muslims and Christians' in 1969 in which it acknowledges that both Christians and Muslims believe that God has spoken to human beings, and that Jews, Christians and Muslims are all “people of the book”. It then goes further to state that:

What is common to both religions is the respect they show for the Word of God and the desire they have to follow it. The difference between them comes from the fact that for one religion, this Word is a person, Jesus Christ, while for the other, it is a book, the Qur'an.... A Christian spirituality which is directed to dialogue between Islam and Christianity will therefore insist above all on this actual and attentive presence of God's Word. There is a great danger with us as with Muslims, of setting limits to the divine word and confining it within closed systems of human making. The Word of God is alive, it acts without ceasing, it is still speaking, but those who should be listening are distracted, or rather they are looking to the past, while the Spirit today is calling us to look to the future.²¹

In the first chapter of his *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) titled “Jesus Christ the only Saviour”, Pope John Paul II reiterates the perennial position of the Church on religious pluralism and the claims of Christianity. Taking John 14:6 as his point of departure, he scans through the Scripture and the sapiential deposit of the Church to establish the unique and universal mediatorship of Jesus Christ in which salvation is offered to all and sundry; he concludes with the Church as the instrument and dispenser of the salvation won for us in Christ. Hence, “we cannot but speak” (Acts 4:20).

While respecting the beliefs and sensitivities of all, we must first clearly affirm our faith in Christ, the one Saviour of mankind, a faith we have received as a gift from on high, not as a result of any merit of our own....Confirming his words by miracles and his resurrection from the dead, Christ proclaimed himself to be the Son of God dwelling in intimate union with the Father, and was recognized as such by his disciples. The Church offers mankind the Gospel, that prophetic message which responds to the needs and aspiration of the human heart and always remains “Good News”. The Church cannot fail to proclaim that Jesus came to reveal the face of God and to merit salvation for all humanity by his cross and resurrection.²²

The 2002 Declaration of the Doctrine of Faith (*Dominus Iesus*) says exactly the same thing from a different angle. Established as the universal sacrament of salvation, the Church strives to preach the Gospel to all nations and make Christ, with his fullness of Divine Revelation and means of salvation, contemporaneous to people in every time and place. Twenty centuries of human civilization had lent credibility to this unique and universal message of Christianity even in the face of pluralism, relativism and false irenicism that characterize modernity. In fact, these modern waves only give further impetus to the Magisterium’s particular attention to “the evangelizing mission of the Church, above all, in connection with the religious traditions of the world”.²³ The Church, therefore, cannot retract her position or put a hold on its evangelizing mission. By and large, however, her position has been that of truth, tolerance

and dialogue in the face of religious pluralism and its attending consequences.

CHARTING A NEW DIRECTION IN THE ON-GOING DISCUSSION

Henceforth, we shall concern ourselves with opening up a new course of approach to the on-going discourse by which the position and claims of the Christian church can be better appreciated, albeit, borrowing from the more orthodox thoughts on the matter.

NECESSARY CLARIFICATIONS

At this outset of our presentation, there is the need to make two important clarifications that are germane to the discussion and set ourselves on the right track. With the above claims of Christianity, streams of questions naturally begin to rise in one's mind: What about those who do not believe in Christ? What is the justification for this bold claim of Christianity? Does it then mean that the non-Christians will not be saved? Does it mean that only Christians will go to heaven? Why this gratuitous preference for Christians? What is the salvific value of other religions? And so on. In the first place, we must recognize that **it all borders on the capacity and guarantee of religions to mediate salvation to their adherents. It is therefore a question of the truth of the means of salvation they possess and its justification beyond reasonable doubts.** In other words, sentiments aside, if a certain religion claims to be the true or best religion with all its belief systems, rites and practices, the main interest of humanity in it is its capacity to mediate eternal salvation to us beyond the veil of death that is the unhappy end of every mortal.

On a second note, **the question of the individual's salvation should not be confused with the salvific value present in the various religions, which is the matter under discussion, since formal belongingness to or membership of a certain religion does not exhaust a person's identity and activities.** A person may not accept or follow in full the beliefs and practices of his religion based on his/her individual conscience yet still remain an adherent of that

religion. Syncretism in its various shapes and sizes is a reality in the lives of too many religious folks. If God, the Supreme Being, is one as most religions believe, then he reserves ultimately the prerogative of determining who eventually secures eternal salvation or not, of course, without contradicting himself and his essential revelations. As the Catholic Church teaches, “God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments”.²⁴ A person may thus belong to a non-Christian religion, for instance, yet eventually merit the salvation offered in Christ. In any case, based on their claimed revelations from God, any religion (like Judaism, Christianity and Islam) that lays claim to universal truths and the plenitude of the means of salvation must have to justify its claims before all.

SUMMUM BONUM: OUR NECESSARY POINT OF DEPARTURE

Every human action is a means to an end, and so are all human activities and projects. “Since there are many actions, acts and science, it follows that their ends are many too the end of medical, science is health; of military science, victory; of economic science, wealth”. But in all these small and great activities and engagements of human life, some ends are superior to others and these superior ones are still inferior to some others so that one end attained still becomes a means to further ends. And the sequence continues. “If then our activities have some end which we want for its own sake, and for the sake of which we want all the other ends... It is clear that this must be the Good, that is, the supreme good”.²⁵ Now, all our actions and projects in life aim at one ultimate end which is considered the supreme good of man. This “end of all ends”, the *Summum Bonum* (Highest Good) is happiness.

There are divergent views on happiness. Some think that happiness can be found in material goods, while some think it is to be found in pleasure. For some others, happiness is found in wealth, and still, some think it is to be found in social prestige, fame or celebrity or in great learning. But the reason, revelations, experience and learning of over sixty centuries of human existence have united their voices to tell us that

happiness cannot be found in all these temporal goods, but in a good that endures even beyond death. A happiness that is truncated by death is obviously not the one that the human hearts craves, but the one that ensures perfect felicity in a life of immortality. This, interestingly, is what religion promises to humanity; so it is that the *homo sapiens* is incurably religious,²⁶ clinging to the God of religion for security and provision in this life (cf. John 10:10), and for eternal happiness (or salvation) beyond the veil of death in a life to come (cf. John 14:1-3). Hence, for St Thomas Aquinas, man's ultimate end is bipartite: the subjective and the objective. While the subjective end of man is the ultimate goal of all his actions this is perfect happiness; his objective end is that reality in which when possessed, man rests from all his quests and takes final repose because it gives him the perfect happiness he longs for this is God.²⁷

AT A CROSSROAD: ONE GOD, MANY RELIGIONS

Thanks goodness, the natural craving of the human heart finds a reliable promise of fulfilment in the God of religion so that following His moral and pious precepts, man may at last attain eternal life after death. But then, there comes the bomb blast, God is one, yet there are many religions, each claiming to be the true and the best mediator of God's salvific events for us. We are at a crossroad; one that touches on the ultimate questions and values, on our eternal destiny and happiness. Addressing the issue then is a serious venture that is not to be glossed over or toiled with, but to be faced with the honesty and objectivity it demands. Before responding to this question of one God, many religions, it is good to first make sense of the fact, to reconcile ourselves with the reality so as not to be led into despair or entire loss of faith in God.

Having one God and many religions makes some sense depending on how and from which perspective we look at it. Religion in theory and practice is the unifying reality of God and man, which bridges the gap between the finite and the Infinite. As such, it must feature both divine and human attributes. In this way, we can concede that the best and glorious aspects of religion stem from its divine side while the imperfect and ugly side of it stem from its human side. If, for

instance, there are miracles and graces, prayers and deceptions, in religion, which definitely are, then, we know that the first pair (miracles and graces) is rooted in God while the second (prayers and deceptions) is rooted in man. Again, we know that God is infinite and incomprehensible to us mortals, for he dwells in unapproachable light (cf. 1 Tim.6:16). His being and ways are simply outside our full grasp. This common sense truth is even supported by the Scripture (cf. Rom. 11:33-36; 1s. 40:13-18; Job 11:7-9; Wis. 9:13-14). Hence, God's transcendence and human limitation or inability to grasp Him gives room to our various ideas of God, of understanding Him and so of worshipping Him. Hence, the fact of one God, many religions.

Now, to the question: Why is there one God and many religions? Our first response is that **having many religions when there is only one God and one mediator is a consequence of the Original Sin (cf. Gen. 3:1-7)**. This is the mirror from which we look into and see other reasons for the multiplicity of religions. Original Sin and so, fallen humanity, is at the root of our human nature and cultural traditions. What are the consequences of the sin of our first parents? The consequences are itemized in two broad statements: loss of supernatural gifts and wounding of human nature. Loss of supernatural gifts (sanctifying grace) has the character of guilt as man turning away from God, and of punishment in God turning away from man. As a result of the wounding of human nature, the whole man in his body and soul was changed for the worse so that man is now subject to suffering, ignorance, malice, spiritual infirmity, concupiscence (natural attraction to sin against the judgment of reason) and eventually to death.²⁸ It is the wounding of human nature, especially in spiritual infirmity and ignorance, that basically explains the multiplicity of religions as a consequence of original sin. On this, the Scripture has the following to say: "For the corruptible body burdens the soul, and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns. And scarcely do we get the things on earth, and what is within our grasp we find with difficulty; but when things are in heaven who can search them out." (Wis. 9:15-16).

The second reason is the varieties of cultural settings and mode of Revelation. Even though all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23), God still wants everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1Tim 2:4). And so, he reveals himself to our forefathers in many and various ways through their “various prophets” (Heb. 1:1), so that through their own cultural sages, wise men, philosophers, religious leaders and traditions,²⁹ the idea of the true God may be kept alive in some way, though partial, pending the full revelation of himself in his Son Jesus Christ. (cf. Col. 1:15). Due to the varieties of cultural settings in which God made partial revelations of himself, and the mode in which they received such revelations, people understand God variously and worship him accordingly. Hence, there are many religions. The problem, as we shall see clearly in the third reason, is that even after God made the full revelation of himself in Christ, many still refuse to leave behind their partial knowledge of God and worship him “in spirit and in truth” as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The third reason is imperfect and varied interpretation of divine revelation. When God reveals himself to humans, his revelation is often wrongly interpreted and distorted to sooth our personal interests. These will obviously give room for many and distorted ideas of God and how to worship Him. The personal interests that some seek in being founders of religions is not small at all. It ranges from vainglory, money, popularity, social and political prestige and the likes; and for these, they could go to any length. Of them, the Scripture says, “They suppose religion as a way of enriching themselves” (1Tim. 6:3-5). For this reason, the Scripture tells us that divine revelation especially as contained in the Scripture, is not a matter of personal or private revelation but of the whole believing community, the Church (cf. 2Pet. 1:20). Thus conceding and tolerating the varieties of religions, it is left for them to justify objectively their salvific claim, their inherent capacity (and how) to grant believers eternal salvation, that is, perfect happiness, the *Summun bonum*, which is inscribed in human nature and for which the human heart craves.

JUSTIFYING THE TRUTH CLAIM (TO ETERNAL SALVATION) OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

Our justification of the truth claim of Christianity to offer eternal salvation shall be in four senses: we shall give the argument, then we shall substantiate the argument; following that, we shall positively relate Christianity to other religions in what is termed “truth and tolerance; and finally, we shall lubricate the justification with two analogies to better bring this whole erudition home to the level of the simple minded.

9.1 PRESENTATION OF THE ARGUMENT (A *MODUS PONENS*)

Christianity is among three great proselytizing religions that make absolute claims about God and eternal salvation. It must now justify its religious claims. We present our justification in a logical argument in the form of a “*Modus Ponens*”,³⁰ - a form of valid deductive arguments that has three propositions in which if we have the antecedent, then, the consequence necessarily follows as a valid conclusion. For instance:

If A, then, B
We have A
∴ B follows

First Premise

As believers, we all know that this world is not our eternal home since we shall surely die, and there is life after death. So, we spend our lives on earth to live well so as to be worthy of admission into the life of heaven after our death. But how do we know what is required and required of us for the eternal life of heaven which we hope to gain after our death? By divine revelation, we suppose. Thus, **if we can have a true divine revelation on God and heaven, then our eternal happiness with God in heaven after our death (*Summum Bonum*) is assured.**

Second Premise

Christianity is the religion of one God in three persons and three persons in one God (Trinity) founded by Jesus Christ, the God-man who gave up his life to redeem humanity from sin eternal damnation by his life, death and resurrection.

Before he ascended into heaven, he founded the Church to administer to people everywhere the redemption and salvation he won for us. Hence, **Christianity presents itself as the religion that gives us the truest, surest and most reliable divine revelation about God and how we can merit the eternal happiness of heaven after or death.**

Conclusion

From the above, since we have a true divine revelation on God and heaven in Christianity, it follows that our eternal happiness in heaven after our death (*Summum bonum*) is assured. **Therefore, Christianity appears as the truest and most reliable religion for our *Summum bonum*.**

In the first premise of the argument above, both the antecedent and consequent are presented in a conditional proposition. The main body of the proposition is the last statement in bold. In the second premise, we have the antecedent, equally presented in bold. And so, the consequent simply follows as the valid and sound conclusion.

SUBSTANTIATING THE ARGUMENT

What we are left with now is to substantiate the antecedent of our argument, to support the *modus ponens* above with facts and figures so that our position can win acceptance based on “sufficient reason”. The antecedent of our argument is **“Christianity presents itself as the religion that gives us the truest, surest and most reliable divine revelation about God and how we can merit the eternal happiness of heaven after our death.** How do we substantiate this? Follow closely.

We rely on divine revelation to know of God and what is required of us to merit heaven and eternal happiness after our life on earth; but since no one has been to heaven and come back to tell us the mind of God or how we should live to be worthy of heaven after death, the authenticity of any claimed divine revelation is doubtful if we must be objective and true to ourselves. If this were the end of the story, then life is absurd - that on such a great value or even the greatest value as our eternal salvation, we don't have a sure direction. But

happily, we have a sure direction in the testimony and teaching of someone who has been to heaven and come to earth to tell us about the life of heaven, the mind of God and what is required of us to get to heaven. He is Jesus Christ, the Son of God and God the Son. Jesus himself declared that no one has ever been to heaven and come back except himself, and so can authentically and authoritatively tell us the mind of God, tell us about the life of heaven and how to get to heaven ourselves. In John 1:18 he said, “No one has ever seen God. The only Son, of God, who is close to the Father’s side has made him known” (see also John 3:13 & 6:46). If this is true as we know and believe it to be, obviously, every other revelation claimed to be from God automatically falls short before that of Jesus Christ. **The truth and universality of the Christian religion is thus established.**

But there remains another big problem; Jesus came from heaven to tell us the mind of God and how to be saved eternally, yet he did not remain in the world to tell this to all generations himself so that all may see him and believe him hearing “from the horse’s mouth”. Instead, he lived and died after about 33 years; then he resurrected and ascended back into heaven from where he came. And between us in this century and Jesus Christ in the first century A.D was a time space of about two thousand years. How then do we get the authentic message of Jesus clean and undiluted? Who will transmit it to us from generation to generation? One thing we would not lose sight of here is that this is an important matter of our eternal salvation and we must not presume unduly or settle down for half-truths. So, anybody or any “body” (institution) that will claim to be the authentic transmitter of the revelation of Jesus Christ must first and foremost be able to connect us historically to the time of Jesus and his apostles: either he/she is another credible old man like Methuselah who would have lived in the time of Jesus up till our own time and so could authoritatively transmit to us the message of Jesus; or, if it is an established institution, it must be able to connect us from where we are now back to the time of Jesus in an unbroken historical existence.

We don’t have such an old man like Methuselah to do the job; so we are left with established and existing institutions.

Now, any established body: institution, Church, NGO, Company, etcetera. that would do this must be able to trace its origin back to the time of Jesus and his apostles in an unbroken historical line. Looking into the origin and history of various institutions, especially of Christian churches which claim to bear the divine revelation and mission of Jesus Christ, we find none whose historical origin dates back to the time of Jesus and his apostles except the Catholic Church. Christ himself consciously and deliberately founded it on the apostles whom he carefully selected (Luke 6:12-16) and commissioned authoritatively as the witnesses to the Christ-event (cf. Matt. 16: 17-17; 18:19-20; 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21-23); with the declaration that whoever listens to them listens to him and by extension, listens to the Father who sent him (Matt. 10:40; Luke 10:16). If indeed, as the Scripture says, the Christian Faith as well as the eternal destiny of Christians rest on the resurrection of Christ (cf. 1Cor. 15:12-19), then, the testimony of the witnesses to this resurrection becomes decisive for the existence of the Church and its credibility.³¹ **Hence, the unicity and universal claim of the Catholic Church as the authentic Church of Christ as well as the instrument and transmitter of the salvation offered in Christ is established.**

IN THE DOMAIN OF TRUTH AND TOLERANCE

At this juncture, we are in the domain of “Truth and Tolerance”. The truth is what is established above; but that does not mean that other religions, much more, other Christian ecclesial bodies have no truth in them or have no means of salvation. What it rather means is that in Christianity, and more precisely, in the Catholic Church, is to be found this truth in its authenticity (with the highest authority) and the means of salvation in its plenitude. Hence, we do not pronounce any wholesale condemnation on other ecclesial bodies or on other religions; we recognize the truth and the means of salvation they possess and extend hands of solidarity to them; to one, in Inter-religious dialogue; to the other, in Ecumenical dialogue. This is the domain we call “Truth and Tolerance”. It is an orthodox and broadminded

attitude which holds unto the truth it has got hold of without precluding that others too may be somehow correct; and so, extends hands of solidarity and mutual understanding to all.

By way of comparison, there is a difference between a student who was asked what is 7×7 and who requested for options “a to d”, and when these options were given he picked one and he thus got the answer correctly; and another student who was asked the same question but without requesting for options, simply answered it correctly. Again, there is a difference between two persons who are doing the right thing, one of whom has been doing it originally right from the onset; and the other who only copied the former. In the first example, though both students may get the answer correctly, we can discern that perhaps one only chanced at the correct answer while the other student really knew the answer. In the second example, we can discern the originality and sincerity of the first person and the subsequence and imitation of the second person. And we know the truth of the saying “imitation is limitation”; this is true *mutatis mutandis* even in religious matters.

TWO ANALOGIES ON CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS

We use two analogies to better drive home the points being made above: a) the analogy of the two strangers locating a destination; b) the analogy of the tree turned upside down.

a) Two strangers locating a destination

There are two strangers in a certain town each having an address but without the direction to their destination. **Stranger A** met a man and asked for his assistance to get to his destination showing him the address he has at hand. Then, the man gives him the direction: just follow this road and it will lead you to a junction ahead, on getting to the junction, turn left and continue going forward. You will then get to a roundabout, follow the left route which stops at a five storey building, beside this building are two roads, one is stony and tiny, the other is sloppy and bushy, if you follow the stony road, your destination is the white house at the left end of the road, but if you follow the sloppy road, your destination is the

same white house but at the right end of the road, just immediately after you cross a small bridge along.

In the same town is **Stranger B** with the same address. He met a man and asked for his assistance to locate the same destination. The man he met looked at the address and agreed to help the stranger. He then led him by the hand to the destination.

The man that assisted **Stranger A** represents the world religions which direct humanity on its way to God, to heaven. They show us the way to God. On the other hand, the man that assisted **Stranger B** is Christ who directly leads humanity to God. While others have been showing us the way, Christ is THE WAY in person that leads to God, to heaven (cf. John 14:16).

b) The tree turned upside down

Imagine there is a normal tree, tall and with many branches, but turned upside down (not uprooted). All the branches of the tree represent all the religions of the world; and the leaves, fruits and flowers on them are the truths of and means to salvation they contain. They are all leading to God - the invisible part of the tree, the root. The branches of the tree are of diverse varieties, while some of the branches are small, others are big; while some are tiny, others are fat; while some are fragile, others are strong; and so on. Some branches even lead to other branches and connect to bigger ones. But, all the branches eventually connect to the trunk or stem of the tree which alone leads to the root of the tree.

In the above picture, the branches of the tree in their various shapes and sizes are all the religions and spiritual traditions of the world - some stronger and bigger than others; some connecting and leading to others. But Christianity is the stem or trunk of the tree to which all the branches eventually lead to as the sole connection that leads to the invisible root of the tree (cf. Col. 1:15-18).

CONCLUSION

Finally, we have come to the end of this whole endeavour and it is hoped that at least if not putting the controversy to some rest on the objective theoretical level, at least, a fresh

path is opened up which the debate can follow with more effective results. In the spirit of truth and tolerance, therefore, we accept the truth present in other religions but still affirm the unicity and ultimacy of the Christian religion.

Consequently, one must rule out the existence of different economies of salvation for those who believe in Jesus and those who do not believe in him. There can be no roads leading to God that do not converge in the only road which is Christ (cf. Jn. 14:6).³²

For, the “God who wishes all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1Tim. 2:4) is the same Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whose plan of salvation “in Christ” even precedes creation (cf. Eph. 1:3-10). Hence, as the Scripture says, “There is only one God and there is only one mediator between God and man the human race, the man Jesus Christ who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1Tim. 2:5-6).

We realise that this is an important matter with a firm grip on our eternal destiny and on which we must not compromise or settle down for half-truth, much less treat it with indifference. As we evinced at the outset, the question of truth cannot be justly separated from religion because God Himself is the Ultimate Truth in Person. He could allow the co-existence of many religions, not as a good *per se*, but as “a necessary evil”, a “*felix culpa*” (happy fault), and which He in his omnipotence and omniscience knows how to resolve at the appointed time. He calls us to cooperate with him in truth and love. As we look forward to more insightful contributions and new perspectives on the issue, therefore, we remain open to both inter-religious dialogue and ecumenism in theory and practice.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ J. Ratzinger. *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions*: San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2004, p. 162.
- ² In the above passage, Jesus changed the existing *status quo* on six

aspects of the Old Law: on anger, on adultery, on divorce, on taking of oaths, on taking of revenge, and on how to relate with one's enemies, each of which he begins with the saying "You have heard it said to the people of old. . . . But now I say to you". (cf. D-M Odunsi. *In Spirit and in Truth. Nourishment for our Journey of Faith*: Iperu Remo, Ambassador Publications, 2015, p.15). In this way, he abolished the standard of the old Law and set a new standard of his own without reference to any other authority.

3. In a survey of Jesus' miraculous signs, biblical scholarship has revealed: 4 raising of the dead including his own resurrection; 9 miracles of nature; 19 various forms of healings and cures; 4 exorcisms or deliverance; and 7 foretelling of the future. (Cf. also J.N.M Winjngaards. *Background to the Gospels*: Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 2007; pp. 220-221).
4. W.A. Jurgens. *The Faith of the Early Fathers*: Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, Vol. 3, 1984, n. 1428, pp.5-6.
5. For more information on the various turns and trends the debates on the plurality of religions and the universal claims of Christianity have taken, see: ITC. *Christianity and the World Religions* (1997) in International Theological Commission, Texts and Documents, Vol. II, 1986-2007, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2009, pp. 145-186; J. Ratzinger. *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions*: San Francisco; Ignatius Press, 2004, pp. 15-109; Hans Kung. *Theology for the Third Millennium*: New York, Doubleday Publishers, 1988, pp. 209-256; J.O. Onaiyekan. *Seeking Common Grounds. Inter-Religious Dialogue in Africa*: Nairobi, Paulines Publications, 2013, pp. 23-35.
6. ^{6v} *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: nn. 234, 237.
7. P.J. Glenn. *A Tour of the Summa of St Thomas Aquinas*: Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1999, p. 28.
8. St Augustine of Hippo. "The Trinity" in W.A Jurgens. *Faith of the Early Fathers*: Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, Vol. 3, 1984, n1670, p. 78.
9. Assessed with the canons of concord, this statement is grammatically incorrect with regard to number, for it predicates a singular "name" of plural persons "Father, Son and Holy Spirit". But Christ who made the statement was not concerned with its grammatical correctness but with the theological message being passed across. The singular "name" points to the oneness of the divine nature unity of God; while the "Father, Son and the Holy Spirit" points to the trinity of persons; and their equality is necessarily implied since the name is predicated of the three without distinction or qualification.
10. By appropriation is understood a mode of predication in which the properties and activities of God which are common to the Three Persons, are attributed to an Individual Person (*appropriare nihil est aliud, quam commune trahere ad proprium*). Cf L. Ott. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*: Rockford Illinois, Tan Books and Publishers Inc.1974, p. 72.

- ¹¹ Cf. also D-M. Odunsi. In Spirit and in Truth: Iperu Remo, Ogun State; Ambassador Publications, 2015, pp. 34-38.
- ¹² Cf. J. Dupuis & J. Neuner (ed). *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*: Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 2008, pp.6-10.
- ¹³ For Origen, it is “*Extra Ecclesiam, nemo salvatur*” (Outside the Church, no one is saved); for St Augustine: “A man cannot have salvation except in the Catholic Church. Outside the Catholic Church, he can have honour and sacraments; he can sing 'Alleluia' and respond 'Amen'; he can possess the Gospel; he can have and preach the faith in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; but never except in the Catholic Church will he be able to find salvation”; and for St. Fulgence, “Hold most firmly and never doubt in the least that not only all pagans but also all Jews and all heretics and schismatics who end this present life outside the Catholic Church are about to go into the eternal fire that was prepared for the Devil and his angels” (Cf. W.A Jurgens. *The Faith of the Early Fathers*: Vol. 1 n. 537, p. 214; Vol. 3, nn. 1492; 1858 and 2275).
- ¹⁴ Cf. R. McBrien. *Catholicism*: London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, p. 386.
- ¹⁵ The Decree of the Council reads: The Holy Roman Church... firmly believes, professes and preaches that no one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews, heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life, but they will go to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Mt. 24:41), unless before the end of their life they are joined to (*aggregate*) it...”(J. Dupuis & J. Neuner (ed) *The Christian Faith*: Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 2008, p. 309-310)
- ¹⁶ Cf. R. McBrien. *Catholicism*: London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, p. 387.
- ¹⁷ Cf. R. McBrien. *Catholicism*: Ibid, pp. 387-390.
- ¹⁸ Ibid: p. 388.
- ¹⁹ Cf. *Lumen Gentium* nn.16, 17; *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, nn. 3, 9,10, 11,15, 16,18,34 ; *Dignitatis Humanae* nn. 1-4; *Nostrae Aetate* nn. 1, 2-5; *Gaudium et Spes* nn. 12, 22, 36, 57, 92.
- ²⁰ Cf. R. McBrien. *Catholicism*: p. 389.
- ²¹ Cf. D. J. Murphy (ed). *The Church and the Bible. Official Documents of the Catholic Church*: Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 2007, pp. 359-360.
- ²² Pope John Paul II. *Redemptoris Missio* (On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate): Dec. 7, 1990, n. 11.
- ²³ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. *Declaration Dominus Iesus* (On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church): Vatican, August 6, 2000, no 2
- ²⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: n. 1257.
- ²⁵ Aristotle. *Ethics* (Translated by J.A.K Thomson): London, Penguin Books, 1955, Book 1, Chapter 1, p. 63.

- ^{26.} St Augustine expresses this with the saying, “God, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you”. And specifically for the Africans, John Mbiti rightly says, “*Africans are notoriously religious; and each people have its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it*” (J. S. Mbiti. *African Religion and Philosophy*: London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1969, p. 1).
- ^{27.} *Summa Theologiae*, 1a IIae, q. 1 art. 8, in P. J. Glenn. *A Tour of the Summa of St Thomas Aquinas*: Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1996, p. 100.
- ^{28.} L. Ott. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*: Rockford, Illinois, Tan Books and Publishers, 1974, pp112-113.
- ^{29.} Because God wants everyone to be saved, he reveals himself to us and meets us “where we are”, in the ways and manners we can best understand. When, for instance, Christ was born, his birth was revealed to the Jewish shepherds through “the apparition of an angel” (which their cultural history and traditions have featured many times) and so is best suited to them; but it was revealed to the Gentile sages “through the stars” which they could better understand from their cultural settings and professional competence. God truly meets us where we are.
- ^{30.} A *Modus Ponens* is a logical argument from a conditional statement together with its antecedent to its consequent which emerges as the valid conclusion (cf. T. Mautner (ed). *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*: London, Penguin Books, 1996, 2000, p.360).
- ^{31.} In his Commentary on St John's Gospel, St Cyril of Alexandria writes on the importance of the apostolic office as follows: “These happy disciples became the pillar and ground of all the truth, for Christ said that he had sent them just as he had been sent by the Father. Thus he showed both the dignity of the apostolic office and the incomparable glory of the power transmitted to them, and he was suggesting, so it seems, the manner of life the apostles were to follow” (Cf. *The Divine Office. Daily. The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite*: London, Collins, a division of Harper Collins Publishers, 2006, Vol. III. p. 358*).
- ^{32.} International Theological Commission. *Christianity and the World Religions*: Vatican, 1997; n. 49e.