

Is God at Work Outside the Church?



Introduction

Many Catholics today live and work in a multi-faith society in Britain. They meet Hindus, Muslims and others, make friendships and play in the same sports team or take their children to the same local school. Eventually they will ask themselves or be asked: "Is God at work outside the Church?". This leaflet is written to help answer this difficult question.

God's presence in other religions

We may start with the teachings of Vatican II, as many bishops from all over the world felt the pressing urgency of this question. They issued a document called the **Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions**. In it the Church teaches that "God's providence and his evident goodness and his plan of salvation

extend to all men and women. (cf. Wisdom 8:1; Acts 14:17; Romans 2:6-7; 1 Timothy 2:4)" (1). This means that, regardless of colour, sex, status or religion, we know that God is truly concerned about and loves every single person desiring his or her salvation.

The next important point is the clear recognition of the presence of God, in various ways and different degrees, within the world religions. This applies to "primitive religions", as well as to Hinduism, Buddhism and especially to Islam and Judaism. We are told that the "Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions." (2). This means that there are many practices, ways of living, moral and doctrinal teachings within the world religions, which, while not always in agreement with Christian teachings, "often reflect the brightness of that Truth which is the light of all men and women." (2). This should make us look very carefully at the festivals, practices, teachings and life styles of people from other Faiths. We have much to learn. We will not compromise our Catholic faith if we, like the bishops, with real respect, reverence and joy, acknowledge the presence of God in the world religions. It is therefore a cause for joy that God, who loves and desires the salvation of all women and men, makes himself present to people of other Faiths.

Supporting other religions

But we are urged to go a step further. The Catholic "must acknowledge those good spiritual and moral elements and social and cultural values found in other religions, and preserve and encourage them."

(2). Consequently two demands are made

of us. First, that we do not hold back from seeing the many good and valuable things within the other religions. Second, that we play our part in promoting and supporting such worthwhile elements, whenever we recognise them. Catholics should not feel guilty or unfaithful in actively supporting certain freedoms for those from other Faiths to practice and believe. It is also clear that we ourselves may well come to know God more deeply in this process. Learning about other religions and meeting their followers can be a real opportunity to deepen our prayer life, our liturgy, learning to use silence and music and art, for instance, in new ways. We should be grateful for the many and diverse ways in which God has made himself known, and be humbled at how little we know of his graciousness. Hence, to the question: Is God at work outside the Church? – we may answer: Yes.

Christ: the way

However, these teachings must also be balanced with other important truths. The document stresses the duty to proclaim "Christ who is 'the way, the truth and the life' (John 14:6). In him men and women find the fullness of their religious life and in him God has reconciled all things to himself."

(2). This reminds Catholics that the true Trinitarian God is definitively revealed through the incarnation and that all grace, always and everywhere, is the grace of the Trinitarian God. It is therefore true in one sense to say that all salvation is through Christ. Christ can be seen as the source of a huge stream, which flows where it will. The Holy Spirit's influence, like the stream, we cannot control but can recognise with the help of Christ.

This statement also reminds us of our duty to reflect the Gospel through our words, deeds and thoughts and to proclaim Christ in our lives. Deep respect and reverence towards the world Faiths should not discourage witness. The Church is still entrusted to safeguard the truth. So knowing that God may be present in the world religions should not obscure the fact that in other religions sin and error are also present. We are likely to find much that moves us deeply, as well as much that puzzles us, and that which we cannot accept. What is required of us is the prudent and difficult task of discerning the Holy Spirit while also being open to the mysterious ways in which the Spirit works. Besides deepening our understanding of God through encounter with the world religions, we may also become aware of new forms of human self-deceit and spiritual egoism. Needless to say, our own Catholic history has these two sides to it. It is indeed a Church of saints and sinners.

The future of society

In a troubled world full of strife, tragedy and injustice, it is important to note that the Church asks all Christians to join with those of other Faiths to bring about a better society. It says that Catholics should "make sincere efforts at mutual understanding and . . . work together in protecting and promoting for the benefit of all men, social justice, good morals as well as peace and freedom."

(3). Catholics can work side by side with people of other Faiths in helping to welcome and build the kingdom of God.

We can be confident in saying that God is savingly present outside the Church, while being equally confident and joyous in proclaiming his salvific presence within the Church, both achieved through the death and resurrection of his Son, who through the Holy Spirit founded his Church.

(1) (2) (3) = paragraphs 1, 2 & 3 of the Declaration.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you feel that you can now appreciate more God's work in other Faiths?
2. Has reading this made you want to find out more about the Faith of any non-Christian friend? How could you go about doing this?

Suggested Reading:

Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non Christian Religions (C.T.S. DO 360 3p).

On the teachings on other religions contained in Vatican II documents, recent papal encyclicals and papal homilies: **Other Faiths: What does the Church Teach?**, Catholic Truth Society, 1986.

On the history of the teaching 'no salvation outside the Church': G.D'Costa, "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus – Revisited", in ed. I Hamnett, **Religious Pluralism and Unbelief: Studies Critical and Comparative**, Routledge, London, 1990.

K. Rahner, "Anonymous Christians", **Theological Investigations**, Volume 6, Darton, Longman & Todd.

This is part of the series of leaflets prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote through dialogue, prayer and action the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.

+ Charles Henderson
Chairman

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Further information and copies of these leaflets can also be obtained from:
The Multi-Faith Centre, Harborne Hall, Old Church Road, Harborne, Birmingham B17 0BE and The Westminster Interfaith Programme, 110 Thornbury Road, Osterley, Middlesex TW7 4NN.



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