

## **Lecture 12. Jesus as Universal Savior**

The topic of our final lecture is Jesus as universal savior. We live in a religiously pluralistic world and country. We are constantly interacting with people from other religious traditions. At the same time, Christians profess Jesus Christ to be the savior of humankind, while we also acknowledge the presence and offer of God's grace in the life of every person. How do we hold these beliefs together? We will explore the ways in which the Church in its official teaching, as well as contemporary theologians, talk about Christ as universal mediator of salvation in a world marked by religious pluralism.

### **I. The Everyday Experience of Religious Pluralism**

Our world has a long history of conflict between people of different religious traditions. Pope John Paul II on the importance of interreligious dialogue: "In the climate of increased cultural and religious pluralism, which is expected to mark the society of the new millennium, it is obvious that this dialogue will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace and warding off the dread specter of those wars of religion that have so often bloodied history. The name of the one God must become increasingly what it is: a name of peace and a summons to peace." - Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001), 55.

The Creed of Nicea-Constantinople: "For us human beings and for our salvation, he [the one Lord Jesus Christ] came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became human." (i) The words, "for us human beings" refers to all people.

There has been much discussion through the centuries about Christ as universal savior. The evolution of the key questions can be summed up as follows: Can those who do not believe in Christ, and Christians not in communion with the Catholic Church, be saved? Do non-Christian religious traditions and practices play a positive role in the salvation of their adherents? Should Christians conceive of the pluralism of religious traditions as something positively willed by God, or merely as a fact of life that is tolerated by God?

**II. A Brief Historical Sketch:** The New Testament features a clear missionary thrust: Matthew 28:19-20; Romans 10:14-15 The universal and exclusive role of Jesus in salvation: Acts 4:12 Other passages add nuance: Acts 10:34-35; 46; Acts 17:22-33 The significance of 1 Timothy 2:4-6: holding in tension the teaching about the universal salvific will of God and the affirmation of the unique mediatorial role of Christ.

The Early Church: "Outside the church no salvation" {extra ecclesiam nulla salus) Cyprian and Origen, originally addressed to separated Christians and those at risk of separation. After Christianity becomes the official religion similar warnings were addressed to Jews and followers of Greco-Roman religions. Augustine struggles with interpreting 1 Tim 2:4; he thinks that everyone deserves condemnation because of our participation in the sin of Adam.

Council of Florence: Decree for the Copts (1442) - draws on Fulgentius of Ruspe (early 6th century)—The Church firmly believes 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' (Matthew 25:41) unless before the end of life they are joined to it." - Fulgentius: Selected Works, Fathers of the Church 95, trans. Robert B. Eno (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 104.

Columbus sails to the Americas in 1492. This aroused a new problem of justifying the belief that no one could be saved outside the Church with the realization that there were a multitude of peoples who had lived after Christ that had never had an opportunity to hear the gospel.

Pope Pius IX: He speaks of "invincible and inculpable ignorance of the true faith": 1854: "those who labor in ignorance of the true religion, if that ignorance be invincible, will never be charged with any guilt on this account before the Lord." Pope Pius IX, *Singulari quadam* (delivered at the promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, 1854). 1863: the possibility of nonbelievers being saved not merely by their own efforts but "through the working of divine light and grace" is established in *Quanto conficiamur*. Pope Pius IX *Quanto conficiamur* (letter to the bishops of Italy, 1863), 7.

**III. Vatican II:** *Lumen Gentium* 16 makes a distinction between: Those who "belong" to the new people of God. Those who are "related" to it. There are five groups of people listed who are "related." The members of all five groups are included in God's saving plan and can be saved.

*Gaudium et Spes* 22 states that believers are made partners in the paschal mystery of Christ: "All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all men and women of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly." The Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery

The value of other religious traditions: "Those elements of truth and grace which are found among peoples" are "a secret presence of God." - Pope Paul VI, Ad Gentes (Second Vatican Council, 1965), 9.

Missionaries should become familiar with the national and religious traditions of the people to whom they have been sent and "uncover with gladness the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them" Pope Paul VI, Ad Gentes 11.

**IV. Since Vatican II:** Pope John Paul II, speaking on the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit beyond the bounds of the Church, acknowledged that: "Today as in the past, many people do not have an opportunity to know or accept the gospel revelation or to enter the Church... for such people salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship with the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation." Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), 10. This grace comes from Christ and is communicated by the Holy Spirit.

God "does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain 'gaps, insufficiencies and errors.'" - Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 55.

"Although participated forms of mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value only from Christ's own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his." Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 5, with reference to *Lumen Gentium*, 62.

Explaining further, the *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) states, "Concretely, it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious tradition and by following the dictates of their own conscience that the members of other religious traditions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their savior."

The development of doctrine is an ongoing theological study - the influence of the work of Karl Rahner and Jacques Dupuis.

The Church "rejects nothing of what is true and holy" in other religions; it maintains "a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and

doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women." Pope Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate* (Second Vatican Council, 1965), 2.

Thus there has been a shift in the image of God, from a view of God as One ready to condemn humanity because of sin, toward a view of God as One who is passionate about salvation.

### **Review Questions**

1. What is your experience of encountering people from other religious traditions? How has that experience impacted your own faith?
2. How has the experience of violence fueled by religious conflict influenced the ways in which people perceive religion?
3. What do you think of Vatican II's teaching that the Holy Spirit offers to all people the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery of Christ?
4. What strategy of evangelization should the Catholic Church adopt in a world of religious pluralism?