

The Wider Ecumenism

by Oswin Magrath, O.P.

Although the *oikumene* is the whole inhabited world, the term Ecumenism has been appropriated to relations between Christians. Therefore Fr Eugene Hillman, treating of non-Christian relations with the Church, had to qualify it as *The Wider Ecumenism* in the title of his new book,¹ which develops previous writings of his.²

The relaxation of obstacles, largely legal, to relations of Catholics with other Christians has resulted in a short time in widespread changes of attitudes. These, in their turn, are exerting pressures on theology to review old positions, for ecumenical charity finds certain apparently established views incompatible with its experiences. Of such a nature seem to be the calls to revise the theology of the validity of orders, and of intercommunion.

In the case of the wider ecumenism with non-Christians, the obstacles have been more theological, and, indeed, due largely to a lack of any theology of other religions. The elements of such a theology are to be found in tradition, and in recent years it has been developing in academic circles, especially in Germany. But so far these developments have had little impact on those who live and work in non-Christian places, where the old views and the consequent attitudes persist, with increasing tension being felt by Catholics and all Christians between them and the signs of the times.

Fr Hillman's little book is designed for wide and popular circulation. It is to be hoped that it may go far to open up the Wider Ecumenism as a practical matter, loosening the theological barriers, and making action possible. This again will react on theological theory and stimulate further developments. This book is itself a result of practical contacts with non-Christians among the Masai of Tanzania by a theologically-aware missionary, and a foretaste of what more such thinking in the field might bring.

It is an attempt to make available to others the theological openness which is the fruit of the Vatican Council, and to show that the increasing desire of an understanding between Christians and their neighbours in other religions is something to which the way is now open.

In briefest outline Fr Hillman's use of the theological developments of Karl Rahner, Schillebeeckx, Küng, Schlette and others to open up the Wider Ecumenism can be stated as follows:

¹*The Wider Ecumenism, Anonymous Christianity and the Church*, by Eugene Hillman, C.S.Sp. Burns & Oates, Compass Books, London. 160 pp., 1968. 15s.

²*The Church As Mission*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1966. *Concilium*, Vol. 3 n.2 (1966) and n. 4 (1968), etc.

Grace, leading to salvation in Christ, is *universally* available and and there has never been any purely natural state of man.

Grace leading to salvation in Christ is *equally* available to all men at all times, before and after Christ, inside or outside Christianity. It is given in concrete moral choices presented by God within the providential existential situation of each individual.

Grace leading to salvation in Christ is *socially* available, that is to say through man's social life, and hence through his socially organized religious life.

Non-Christian religions are thus ordinary means of salvation, the common way of the majority of mankind, through which God provides revelation and grace. They are legitimate religions, whose use by men are positive media of a proper relation to God and positively taken account of in God's saving action.

Non-Christians can thus be called anonymous Christians (Rahner), the concealed and dormant people of God in the world (Barth), unconscious Christians (Vonier), invisibly united to Christ (K. Adam, etc.). The terminology is still not quite satisfactory in this matter. It is still taken too much from the point of view of Christians, and not from that of the *oikumene* of all religions. There is still a touch of patronage and triumphalism. Perhaps only the wider ecumenism can find the right terminology in an experienced oneness with those who, in no way feeling themselves to be Christians, are yet positively ordered to Christ.

Although this new theology of religions is opposed, even with violence, by many,¹ it is sufficiently supported by reliable theologians, and evidently in line with the general direction of Vatican II and within the openness left by the Council. It therefore makes a new practical approach possible, just as the relaxation of certain laws did in the case of Ecumenism. Practice may well solve the objections more easily than theorizing.

It is also a liberation for the missionary and others living among non-Christians. Their task becomes intelligible and possible, not one which more and more appears impossible, namely the salvation of the maximum number by incorporation into the Church, the conversion of whole peoples, with the supposition that unless this is done most will perish. To a theologically-aware missionary it is not the view that men can equally well be saved without him that is going to destroy his missionary zeal, but much more the despair of being faced with an apparently unrealizable aim, and the apparent necessity of regarding his non-Christian neighbours as spiritually inferior. Neither he nor they can tolerate this attitude any longer, and the ordinary Christians in non-Christian countries are increasingly feeling the same. The new theology responds to a

¹Esp. H. van Stralen, *Catholic Encounter with World Religions*. Burns & Oates, London, 1966; cf. critique by Agnes Yendell, *New Blackfriars*, February 1967: 'The Crisis in the Missions'.

need which seems to rise from the Holy Spirit in the people.¹

Although this newer view is in the general line of development of missionary theology in recent years, and of the encyclicals and Vatican II, it may perhaps modify the present fairly generally accepted definition of missionary activity as 'implantation of the Church where it does not exist'. From a more widely ecumenical point of view the Church *germinates* out of the 'anonymous Christianity' and is already in some sense planted there prior to the mission.

In the second part of his book Fr Hillman attempts to situate the institutional Church and its missions in the non-Christian world. His insistence that the Church is for the peoples of the world, not for an introverted Christendom, and his castigation, in asides, of this latter attitude, is most valuable. The Church has not as its principal role the salvation of souls, nor pastoral work, nor the establishment (or restoration) of Christendoms, nor the conversion of all individuals in the world or in a people, nor to make salvation easier for some. It is to be the sacramental sign and first fruits of God's salvation in Christ. It is the representative part for the whole, the effective sacrament of salvation for the past, the present and the future.

This general thesis contains very valuable insights and points of theological development. But Fr Hillman's application of this to the historic nations or peoples is more questionable. For the author the missionary task of establishing the Church on indigenous foundations arises from the need that this sign should exist at some time, though not necessarily permanently, in each people, to be the sacrament of the salvation of that people, treated as a corporate personality of its past, present and future members. His scriptural basis is of doubtful value: that this must be done before the end shall come (Mk. 13, 10; Mt. 24, 14) and that re-evangelization, should the Church disappear, is outside the perspective, since the seed is planted once and then left to husbandmen (Mt. 13, 24-43). It gives a kind of theological bias for the separation of peoples and against a world culture, slightly reminiscent of the theologians of apartheid in South Africa. And it is clear that many peoples have existed who have perished without the Church ever existing among them.

The motive of some kind of incorporation into the institutional Church as necessary for salvation, which had been excluded previously, seems to come back here, albeit only in a representative form in a small group and a limited time. And the reason for this seems to be in order to justify missionary zeal and forestall the opponents of the new theology, who attack it as destructive of missionary endeavour. It is doubtful if this is necessary. If the thesis that the Church exists for the world and its peoples, and, hence, especially for non-Christians and their religions, is carried to its conclusion

¹For a very differently placed, but theologically similar, solution of a priest's problem see: Serge de Beaureceuil, *Prêtre des non-chrétiens*. Ccrf, Paris, 1968.

this is a satisfying and meaningful position for Christians in non-Christian countries. It is also a position which, for the whole Church, should lead to a maximum missionary effort, and place the missionary function in the primary position and all others as secondary. That the Church is for the world, well brought out in this book, would seem to be the crucial theological point to bring over to its members. Fully grasped, this will open the Church, beyond its pastoral concerns and its post-Christian dark patches in the West, to the full *oikumene* of all peoples as the primary field of its universal activity. Whether peoples come or go, whether cultures unite or divide, its most urgent task will always be to establish its presence, in fully indigenated form, in whatever cultures and peoples exist.

In conclusion, some applications of Fr Hillman's thesis to African traditional religion, ancestor-worship, can be suggested. Fr Walter Bühlmann, a missiologist, suggested in an article a few years ago (*Concilium*, 3, 1, pp. 28-9) that what was a legitimate religion for the pagans did not necessarily become illegitimate for their Christian relatives, and that, as the apostles practised Judaism while they remained members of the Jewish community, so Christians can take some part in pagan rites. And this is, in fact, what some thoughtful African Christians are doing, under the pressures of the breakdown of segregation of Christians and of a nationalism which desires 'Africa to return'.

Unfortunately the majority join in pagan rites in bad conscience, and, in fact, are living a double religion, because of the absolute prohibitions imposed by the missions. And this is a thing destructive of true Christianity. The test of what a Christian can do would seem to lie in its fruits. What leads to discord, hatreds, fear (and there is much of this in pagan religion) must be excluded; but what is good can be retained. And African ancestor cult is for the most part a dying religion, and very open to re-interpretation. The Christian can make it clear that he interprets it in a Christian way, and is not denying his faith. Owing to vast variations this will have to be decided locally and chiefly by the consciences of enlightened Catholics.

It is not clear that there are dogmatic obstacles. The view that the spirits of the dead continue to influence the lives of the living may disappear because there is no scientific evidence; but in view of the cult of saints and of respectable theories of the natural powers of angels, even fallen ones, over the material universe, it is difficult to say it is to be rejected out of hand theologically. Especially if it can be agreed that the non-Christian dead are likely to be in the grace of God equally with the Christian dead. The link with magic and divination is seen by some as an insuperable obstacle. But again, much magic is simply a naïve science, and much divination perhaps parapsychology. And Africans are interpreting them in this way. Today few enlightened Christians will fail to be conscious also of

the large residue of paganism in the Church and in their own personal lives, and thus ready to tolerate the remains of African paganism as well as the remnants of European paganism. In fact there is more and more hesitation being felt in the mission field about African religion as a thing to be utterly banned. But, unless a theology of it is rapidly developed and widely spread both among the clergy and the laity, the dangers of a confused drift into a double religion are not small. It is to be hoped, therefore, that Fr Hillmann's little book will be widely read and discussed, and applied to local practical needs. There is a great fear of a paganization of Christianity: interpreting Christian doctrine and practice in a pagan way. But the evil of a double-religion is an existing one and probably practised to a greater or lesser degree by most African Christians. Banning has only driven this underground. The remedy is surely a theological instruction of all Christians in their relationship to non-Christian neighbours and their religion. Just as the Council prescribed that Ecumenism must be taught to new Christian converts as part of their preparation for baptism, so also must the Wider Ecumenism be taught.