

# The Declaration *Dominus Iesus*: A Brake on Ecumenism and Interfaith Dialogue?

BY JULIO SAVI

ON 5 September 2000 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the highest officer responsible for the theological ideology of the Catholic Church, presented in the Vatican Press Office a Declaration of that Congregation entitled “*Dominus Iesus*: on the unicity and the salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.” The Declaration bears his signature, but Pope John Paul II had ratified and confirmed it “with sure knowledge and by his apostolic authority [*certain scientia et apostolica Sua auctoritate*]” (§23) and had ordered its publication.<sup>1</sup>

The thirty-six-page Dictum, completed after two years of study by a large group of theologians, consists of an introduction, six brief sections, and a conclusion. Addressed to “Bishops, theologians, and all the Catholic faithful,” it recalls “certain indispensable elements of Christian doctrine” to help its addressees answer “new questions” that may

arise in the practice of interreligious dialogue (§3). The document has been mostly interpreted as proclaiming the need for Catholics to return to the theological position commonly held before the developments in the ecumenical movement during the last thirty years: that Christianity is unique among religions as the repository of divinely revealed truth and that Catholicism and its ecclesiastical institutions are the authoritative interpreters of that truth. It certainly calls for Catholics to pull back from theories inspired by theological relativism and religious pluralism. The response of other religionists and interested parties, within and outside Christianity, was universally and emphatically negative, labeling the document a return to a kind of fundamentalist thinking that, if accepted, could mean the demise of ecumenism. What follows analyzes the contents of the Declaration, summarizes world opinion, and compares the positions expressed in the document with those found in the Bahá’í teachings.

After the presentation by Cardinal Ratzinger, Monsignor Tarcisio Bertone, secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, explained that “the Document . . . reaffirms and summarizes the doctrine of Catholic faith defined and taught in earlier documents of the Church’s Magisterium; and it indicates the correct interpretation thereof in the face of doctrinal errors and ambiguities that have become widespread in modern

---

Copyright © 2001 by Julio Savi. I wish to thank the *World Order* editors for their kind encouragement and precious assistance.

1. *Dominus Iesus* contains an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The paragraphs in the chapters are numbered sequentially from 1 through 23. Passages from the Declaration are cited in the text by paragraph number.

theological and ecclesial circles.”<sup>2</sup> Issued by an institution inferior to the Pope and to the College of Bishops in communion with the Pope, the Declaration is not an infallible document. But, as it was ratified by the Pope with a formula of exceptional authority, “the assent required from the faithful,” according to Monsignor Bertone, “is definitive and irrevocable.”<sup>3</sup> Thus the document needs to be read carefully and fully understood.

### *Its Contents*

*DOMINUS IESUS* holds that at the close of the second Christian millennium, the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church is not only “still far from complete (cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 1: AAS 83 [1991], 249–340),” it is also endangered, within the Church itself, by theories inspired by the theological relativism and religious pluralism espoused by some upholders of the ecumenical movement and conceived to justify religious pluralism “not only *de facto* but also *de jure* (or in principle)” (§4). In presenting the Declaration at the September 2000 press conference Cardinal Ratzinger summarized these theories as being:

the conviction of the elusiveness and inexpressibility of divine truth; relativistic attitudes toward truth itself, which would hold that what is true for some would not

be true for others; the radical opposition posited between the logical mentality of the West and the symbolic mentality of the East; the subjectivism which regards reason as the only source of knowledge; the metaphysical emptying of the mystery of incarnation; the eclecticism of those who, in theological research, uncritically absorb ideas from a variety of philosophical and theological contexts without regard for consistency, systematic connection, or compatibility with Christian truth; finally, the tendency to read and to interpret Sacred Scripture outside the Tradition and Magisterium of the Church.<sup>4</sup>

These theories, he said, imply the denial of some fundamental verities of the Church, such as:

the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, the nature of Christian faith as compared with that of belief in other religions, the inspired nature of the books of Sacred Scripture, the personal unity between the Eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth, the unity of the economy of the Incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit, the unicity and salvific universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ, the universal salvific mediation of the Church, the inseparability—while recognizing the distinction—of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ, and the Church, and the subsistence of the one Church of Christ in the Catholic Church. (§4)

To clarify such claimed errors, the Declaration itself reaffirms concisely the official doctrine of the Catholic Church on six fundamental issues.

*The Fullness and Definitiveness of the Revelation of Jesus Christ.* Chapter 1 of *Dominus Iesus* denies the conception whereby “the truth about God cannot be grasped and manifested in its globality and completeness by any historical religion, neither by Christianity nor by Jesus Christ” (§6), and confirms

2. Intervention of Monsignor Tarcisio Bertone, secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Press Conference for the presentation of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, the Holy See press room, 5 September 2000 (hereafter referred to as “Press Conference.” The Italian text of the Press Conference may be retrieved from the website <[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_2000905\\_dominus-iesus\\_ratzinger\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_2000905_dominus-iesus_ratzinger_it.html)>.

3. Intervention of Monsignor Bertone, Press Conference.

4. Intervention of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Press Conference.

that Jesus' revelation is full and definitive. It is not complementary to that of other religions; rather, it is definitive, and there will be no future revelation before Christ's manifestation in the glory of the Father.

The reasons for the two positions, the Declaration explains, are, first, that faith in Jesus, defined as "the acceptance in grace of revealed truth," is quite different from "belief in the other religions," defined as "that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute (John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, 31–32)." The former is "the acceptance of the truth revealed by the One and Triune God" — that is, the one God, Who is also the tripartite God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; the latter is "religious experience still in search of the absolute truth and still lacking assent to God who reveals himself" (§7). Second, only the Books of the Old and New Testaments are of divine origin and, therefore, are teachers of the truth. The scriptures of the other religions simply "receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace which they contain" (§8).

*The Incarnate Logos and the Holy Spirit in the Work of Salvation.* Chapter 2 of *Dominus Iesus* refutes the theory whereby "Jesus would be one of the many faces which the Logos [the Word of God] has assumed in the course of time to communicate with humanity in a salvific way" (§9). It confirms that the Logos and Jesus are one and the same thing, that Jesus is forever the only incarnation of the Logos, that the Holy Spirit acts only through Jesus, "the mediator and the universal re-

deemer" (§11), and that there is no salvation if not through him.

While commenting upon the Christological contents of the Declaration during the September 2000 press conference at the Vatican, the Salesian Reverend Angelo Amato, secretary of the Pontifical Academy of Theology and consultant to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, explained that *Dominus Iesus* upholds the unicity of the salvific economy of the Incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit and refutes three erroneous theses upheld by relativists "in order to give theological foundations to religious pluralism." The first of these erroneous theses claims that Jesus is "one of many historic-salvific incarnations of the eternal Word and his revelation of the divine was not exclusive, but complementary to other historical figures." Conversely, the Reverend Amato said, the Declaration states that Jesus alone is the incarnation of the Word. The second erroneous thesis "supposes a double salvific economy, that of the Eternal Word as distinct from that of the Incarnate Word." The Declaration rejects this distinction and reaffirms that "[i]f there are elements of salvation and grace outside Christianity, they have their source and center in the mystery of the incarnation of the Word [that is, in Jesus]." The third erroneous thesis "separates the economy of the Holy Spirit from that of the Incarnate Word: the former would be of a more universal character than the latter." However, the Declaration confirms that "[t]here is but one trinitarian divine economy that reaches all humankind, wherefor '[n]o one . . . can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit'" (§12).<sup>5</sup>

*The Unicity and Universality of the Salvific Mystery of Jesus Christ.* Chapter 3 of *Dominus Iesus* confirms that "the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God" (§14). Therefore, it is proper

5. Intervention of the Reverend Angelo Amato, S.D.B [Society of St. Frances de Sales], Press Conference.

to use “in theology terms such as unicity, universality, and absoluteness” as referring to Jesus and his redeeming mission, because, the Reverend Amato explained, “[t]he Church, from the beginning, has believed in Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father who through his incarnation gave the truth of revelation and his divine life to all humanity” (§15).<sup>6</sup> Those who consider that use, Cardinal Ratzinger noted, as “a kind of fundamentalism that would be an outrage against the modern spirit and would represent a threat to tolerance and freedom” are wrong.<sup>7</sup> However, the meaning and the value of the positive figures and elements in the other religions are still to be ascertained. As the Reverend Amato remarked: “The theological debate . . . remains opened.”<sup>8</sup>

*The Unicity and Unity of the Catholic Church.* Chapter 4 of *Dominus Iesus* explains that there is but one Catholic Apostolic Church, founded by Jesus himself, entrusted by Jesus to Peter, and by Peter to his Successors and to the Bishops in communion with them. There are also particular churches that, although they do not accept the Catholic doctrine of the Primacy of the Bishop of Rome, have “the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery (cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 22)” and ecclesial communities that are deprived thereof, and

yet share with the Catholic Church the benefits of the Baptism.<sup>9</sup> This lack of unity among Christians is recognized as “a wound for the Church” (§17).

Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, the vicar general of Opus Dei and consultant to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, explained during the September 2000 press conference at the Vatican that

the only Church of Jesus Christ continues to exist despite the divisions among Christians; and more precisely . . . only in the Catholic Church does Christ’s Church subsist in all her fullness. Nonetheless, outside the Catholic Church ‘elements of truth and sanctification’ exist that are of the Church (cf. 17). . . . Therefore *Dominus Iesus* rejects an interpretation that today is widespread—but contrary to the Catholic faith—according to which all religions, of themselves, are ways of salvation together with Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

*The Close Relationship between the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Christ, and the Catholic Church.* Chapter 5 of *Dominus Iesus* explains that the Catholic Church has been entrusted with the mission of announcing the Kingdoms of Christ and of God and of establishing them in the world. Although the scriptures do not clearly specify the relationship between the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ, and the Church, the three spiritual realities are strictly interconnected. It is clear that the kingdom of God “is the manifestation and the realization of God’s plan of salvation in all its fullness” (John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 15). Thus “the kingdom of God—even if considered in its historical phase—is not identified with the Church in her visible and social reality” (§19). However, the Church is “the seed and the beginning of that kingdom (Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 5)” (§18). To work for the kingdom of God means to work to eliminate evil from the world and, in view of the

6. Intervention of the Reverend Amato, Press Conference.

7. Intervention of Cardinal Ratzinger, Press Conference.

8. Intervention of the Reverend Amato, Press Conference.

9. Although no name is mentioned in the Declaration, it seems evident that the former are the Greek Orthodox Churches and the latter the Protestant Churches.

10. Intervention of Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Press Conference.

close relationship between the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ, and the Church, to work for the Church.

*The Relationship between the Catholic Church and the Other Religions in Relation to Salvation.* Chapter 6 of *Dominus Iesus* confirms that the Catholic Church is the only way to salvation. The Church is not only a social reality but also a spiritual reality. It is from this spiritual reality that salvation comes, in mysterious ways, also to those who follow other religions, which, in Monsignor Ocariz's words, cannot be "in as much as they are religions, of themselves . . . ways to salvation together with Christianity."<sup>11</sup> The Declaration explains in this regard:

This truth of faith does not lessen the sincere respect which the Church has for the religions of the world, but at the same time, it rules out, in a radical way, that mentality of indifferentism "characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that 'one religion is as good as another' (John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 36)." If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation. (cf. Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Mystici corporis*: DS 3821). (¶22)

The Declaration, however, warns Catholics not to think that they are better than others. Their privileged condition does not depend on their merits but only on the grace of God. The duty of announcing the Gospel to all

peoples remains in all its urgency, but the evangelization, Monsignor Ocariz noted, "is not, and cannot be, a self-assertion. It is a due service to the others through the saving truth. And we are neither the origin nor the owners of this truth, but only undeserving beneficiaries and servants. And this truth must always be proposed in charity and respect for freedom (cf. *Ephesians* 4:15; *Galatians* 5:13.)."<sup>12</sup>

As to the proper attitude in interreligious dialogue, Cardinal Ratzinger commented that, according to the relativists, dialogue means "to put on the same plane one's position or one's faith and the beliefs of the others, so that the whole dialogue is reduced to an exchange between essentially equal, and thus relative, positions, in view of the superior aim of reaching the highest level of cooperation and integration between the different religious conceptions." But he made clear that, for Catholics, interreligious dialogue is "the way toward truth, the process whereby one discloses to the other the hidden depth of that which he has encountered in his religious experience, and is waiting to be fulfilled and purified in his encounter with the definitive and full revelation of God in Jesus Christ."<sup>13</sup> The Declaration states that

[e]quality, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ—who is God himself made man—in relation to the founders of the other religions. Indeed, the Church, guided by charity and respect for freedom (cf. Second Vatican Council, Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, 1) must be primarily committed to proclaiming to all people the truth definitively revealed by the Lord, and to announcing the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and of adherence to the Church through Baptism and the other sacraments, in order to participate fully in communion with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (¶22)

11. Intervention of Monsignor Ocariz, Press Conference.

12. Intervention of Monsignor Ocariz, Press Conference.

13. Intervention of Cardinal Ratzinger, Press Conference.



### *Reactions throughout the World*

AS SOON as the Declaration was issued, it unleashed an intense debate in the media. Archbishop Marcello Zago, the Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, pointed out that the aim of the document is “to recall forgotten theological aspects, to return to the heart of the faith and to what it means to be Christians wherever we are.”<sup>14</sup> However, in the words of Karen Armstrong, one of the foremost British commentators on religious affairs, this same concept is the basis of Christian fundamentalist thought: “to go back to basics and reemphasize the ‘fundamentals’ of the Christian tradition, which . . . [the fundamentalists] identif[y] with a literal interpretation of Scripture and the acceptance of certain core doctrines.”<sup>15</sup> For that reason, the Dictum has been judged as fundamentalist and rejected by most non-Catholic Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

*La Repubblica*, one of the foremost Italian newspapers of the left wing, announced the Declaration through an article by Marco Politi, an Italian journalist who is an expert on Vatican issues. The tone of the article is symptomatic of the general atmosphere:

The latest Dictum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith . . . is causing a storm of polemics. The other Christian Churches protest, because they feel declassified by the peremptory proclamation in Ratzinger’s *Dominus Iesus* that Catholicism has a primary and superior role. . . .

14. Archbishop Marcello Zago, quoted in *International Fides Service*, n. 4213, NE 511, 8 Sept. 2000.

15. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Knopf, 2000) x.

16. Marco Politi, “Ratzinger: ‘Salvezza solo nella Chiesa cattolica,’ [“Ratzinger: ‘Salvation only in the Catholic Church’],” *La Repubblica* 25.206 (6 Sept. 2000): 11.

17. R. Jeffrey Smith, “Vatican Claims Church Monopoly on Salvation,” *Washington Post Foreign Service* 6 Sept. 2000: A13.

In point of fact, nothing is left to the other Christians but “returning to the fold.” . . . The same attitude is maintained toward other religions. Although their followers may receive divine grace, “they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation [*Dominus Iesus*, ¶22].” . . .

The Declaration rails at relativism, eclecticism, the thesis whereby there are other “ways of salvation” beside Christianity or that the Word, that is Christ in his divinity, may be manifested outside the event of Christ in his historical incarnation. Heaven help you if you think that all religions are equal. . . .

Fixing its barriers, the Declaration comes to correct and make meaningless the repeated brotherly acts of the Pope toward the Christian Churches and his open-mindedness toward other religions. When the Pope says that God does not fail to be present also in the spiritual heritage of the other religions, new horizons are opened. When Ratzinger emphasizes the fact that the other beliefs are essentially a human religious experience still in search of the absolute truth, it is a call to order.<sup>16</sup>

The tone is similar in other articles in the international press. The *Washington Post* states that, whereas Pope John Paul II had “notably embraced a handful of dicta dating from the famed Second Vatican Council meetings of the mid-1960s, which called for religious liberty and explicitly supported ecumenism, or religious cooperation and unity,”

. . . today’s declaration is concerned more with establishing limits than breaking barriers, and its tone at times seems closer to the inhibiting orders of the First Vatican Council, in 1870. . . . Then, the council lent its support to a “Syllabus of Errors,” which explicitly challenged any notion that other religions were as “true” as Catholicism.<sup>17</sup>

Negative reactions of the Catholic world have been variously described by the media. *Il Resto del Carlino*, an Italian newspaper published in Bologna, announced the Declaration with an article entitled “Wojtyla gets rid of the ‘sister Churches’” and remarked that “It must have not been easy to draft the document *Dominus Iesus*. Which could be criticized even within the Catholic world. In particular, by some Pontifical university.”<sup>18</sup>

A number of Catholic personalities also reacted negatively. Politi writes that, according to the Australian Edward Cardinal Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, “[t]imes and manners . . . are wrong in Ratzinger’s document. The language is not right for ecumenism.” Politi also quotes Cardinal Cassidy as saying that the Declaration is

“a text written by professors for other professors. We have a sensitive ear for ecumenical dialogue, and when we are on the point of offending someone, we perceive it. But when they (the members of the Holy Office, e.n.) Say ‘This is true, this

is false,’ they express themselves in a quite scholastic way. . . . The Pope did not sign the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, whereas he has signed in his own hand the encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint*. . . . I was not there, because I was sick.”<sup>19</sup>

Thomas J. Reese, a Jesuit scholar and editor of the Catholic weekly magazine *America*, is quoted by the *Washington Post* as having said that he was “dismayed that the statement had ‘practically no reference to the dialogue going on for the past 35 years between Catholics and Protestants.’ . . .” “‘The danger,’” he continued, “‘is that this document will be seen as a rejection of that dialogue,’ a message he said he did not think was intended.”<sup>20</sup> Enzo Bianchi, a theologian, a Biblical scholar, and the founder and Prior of the Monastery of Bose, an ecumenical community in the Italian region of Piedmont, wrote: “In the present winter of ecumenism between the churches this document will not be an unsurmountable obstacle on the way, but undoubtedly its reception will be difficult in the ecumenical circles, and it will raise questions, suspicions and disillusion among the other Christian Churches.”<sup>21</sup>

The reaction of other Christian Churches was also negative. The archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, the spiritual leader of the Anglican Church, as quoted in the *Washington Post*, complained that “the idea that Anglican and other Churches are not ‘proper churches’ seems to question the considerable gains we have made.”<sup>22</sup> The bishop of Rochester, England, Michael Nazir-Ali, a member of the Commission for the relations between Catholics and Anglicans, was quoted as having said: “I was shocked. Also many Catholics are shocked. Apparently someone in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith does not love ecumenism and wants to sabotage the dialogue.”<sup>23</sup> The Reverend Manfred Koch, head of Germany’s Lutheran Church and president of the Council of the Evangelical Churches in Germany, who recently

18. Giuseppe Di Leo, “Wojtyla scarica le ‘Chiese sorelle’ [“Wojtyla gets rid of the ‘sister Churches’”],” *Il Resto del Carlino* 115.243 (6 Sept. 2000): 2.

19. Marco Politi, “Vaticano, prime crepe sulla linea Ratzinger [“Vatican, early splits in Ratzinger’s line”],” *La Repubblica* 25.221 (26 Sept. 2000): 18. Cf. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (That They May Be One), Encyclical letter on ecumenical commitment (Vatican City: 25 May 1995) ¶3.

20. Smith, “Vatican Claims Church Monopoly on Salvation,” *Washington Post Foreign Service* 6 Sept. 2000: A13.

21. Enzo Bianchi, “Il difficile dialogo con le Chiese sorelle [“The difficult dialogue with the sister Churches”],” *La Repubblica* 25.208 (8 Sept. 2000): 16.

22. Smith, “Vatican Claims Church Monopoly on Salvation,” *Washington Post Foreign Service* (6 Sept. 2000): A13.

23. The Reverend Michael Nazir-Ali, quoted in Antonio Polito, “Così il cardinale sabota le aperture di Wojtyła’ [“Thus the Cardinal sabotages Wojtyła’s openings”],” *La Repubblica* 25.207 (7 Sept. 2000): 27.

spoke about the need to recognize the Pope as a symbolic unitary figure of Christianity, is reported by the international news agency Zenit as having said that *Dominus Iesus* represents

“a step backwards for ecumenical relations . . . [and] a questionable attempt put the [*sic*] reinstate the defeated absolutist image of the Church from the First Vatican Council, with its limitless primacy of the Pope. It stands in stark contrast to the hopeful concern for inter-Christian ecumenism and interreligious dialogue initiated by the Second Vatican Council. [However] . . . the Declaration has many affirmations that the Reformed Churches could approve without reservations, beginning with the salvific universality of Christ.”<sup>24</sup>

The Reverend Valdo Benecchi, president of the Methodist Evangelical Churches of Italy, was quoted as declaring:

“It’s a jump backwards in terms of ecumenism and with dialogues with other

religions. There is nothing new about this, but we had hoped they had taken another road. This is a return to the past. . . . The salvation through Christ is not deposited in one religion only. This puts not only the Catholic Church at the center, but especially the Catholic hierarchy.”<sup>25</sup>

The Russian Orthodox Monsignor Netchaev Konstantin Vladimirovich Pitirim, a metropolitan of the dioceses of Volokalamsk and Juriev, and a former officer of the World Council of Churches, was quoted as stating: “I think that the declarations of Mr. Cardinal [Ratzinger] are rigorist and selfish. The ecumenical dialogue requires more balanced judgments. . . . His statements on the exclusive role of the Catholic Church could cause, in certain Orthodox circles, accusations against the ecumenical dialogue, accusations of heresy against those who practice ecumenism.”<sup>26</sup>

Pastor Jean-Arnold de Clermont, the president of the French Protestants, was quoted as saying: “This new Declaration of the Vatican . . . stands in singular contrast with the call to humility and open-mindedness toward the others launched by the Catholic Church in the Jubilee year.”<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the World Council of Churches is quoted as observing that “it would be a ‘tragedy’ if Christian cooperation were ‘obscured’ by the Churches’ dialogues about their relative authority and status—however important they may be.”<sup>28</sup> As a consequence, non-Catholic Churches, except the Orthodox, withdrew their representatives from a commission that was planning an event entitled “Marching Religions for Peace,” to be held in Rome on 1 January 2001.

The reaction of other religions was equally negative. The Italian journalist Giuseppe Di Leo wrote: “The ‘hierarchization of religions,’ effected, according to Jews and Muslims, by the Vatican is . . . unanimously condemned: the Catholic Church cannot claim the right of establishing which religion holds salvation.”<sup>29</sup> As to the Jews, Politi writes: “A chill

24. The Reverend Manfred Koch, quoted in “Religious leaders comment on ‘Dominus Iesus’ Declaration criticize Catholic theology but are grateful for clarity,” a dispatch by the international news agency Zenit, which may be found at <Zenit.org>.

25. The Reverend Valdo Benecchi, quoted in Smith, “Vatican Claims Church Monopoly on Salvation,” *Washington Post Foreign Service* 6 Sept. 2000: A13.

26. Monsignor Netchaev Konstantin Vladimirovich Pitirim, quoted in Marco Politi, “Più lontano il viaggio in Russia [“The voyage (of the Pope) in Russia is more remote”],” *La Repubblica* 25.216 (17 Sept. 2000): 9.

27. Pastor Jean-Arnold de Clermont, quoted in Giuseppe Di Leo, “‘Ma questo è un macigno sul dialogo’ [“But this is a stumbling-block in the dialogue”],” *Il Resto del Carlino* 115.243 (6 Sept. 2000): 2.

28. Smith, “Vatican Claims Church Monopoly on Salvation,” *Washington Post Foreign Service* 6 Sept. 2000: A13.

29. Di Leo, “‘Ma questo è un macigno sul dialogo,’” *Il Resto del Carlino* 115.243 (6 Sept. 2000): 2.



has descended over the Church and the Jews. Elio Toaff, the Chief Rabbi of Rome, has sent word 'across the Tiber' [to the Vatican] that it was inconceivable that they [the Jewish and the Catholic hierarchies] could meet as if nothing had happened."<sup>30</sup> Di Leo wrote that Amos Luzzatto, the president of the Union of the Italian Jewish communities, said that if "the only possible mediator for salvation is Jesus Christ," Jews who do not accept the New Testament are removed from all dialogue. Di Leo also quoted Luzzatto as saying: "How can a person speak of 'sincere respect' . . . and then say that other rites or Holy Books serve just as a preparation to the Gospel? No, I am sorry, I do not agree at all . . . that I should always and only be considered by the Church as a human being to be converted to Catholicism."<sup>31</sup> Tullia Zevi, former president of the Italian Jewish Communities, is quoted by Politi as saying that "the Jews are quite dismayed because of 'the contradictions within the Church between an openness to dialogue and a resurgent triumphalism. Any dialogue is difficult when a religion defines itself as first class and con-

siders the others as second class. . . . Clarity is required . . . the Church must get out of her ambiguities."<sup>32</sup> A Jubilee Day of Dialogue, scheduled in Lateran for 3 October 2000, was canceled because of the defection of two rabbis.<sup>33</sup> Hamza Piccardo, the secretary of the Union of Italian Muslim Communities, is reported by Di Leo as saying that "salvation is a divine prerogative. Who is entitled to take the place of God and say, 'with us, yes, with them, no'? . . . the [Catholic] Church has no right to claim to be the only religious institution which holds the truth."<sup>34</sup>

On 1 October 2000, Pope John Paul II defended the Declaration from St. Peter Square, asking that it not be misunderstood. He asserted that the Declaration does not express "either arrogance or contempt toward the other religions, but simply reaffirms Gospel verities in the light of the teaching of Christ and of a sincere will of dialogue with all." He observed that salvation that for Christians comes only from Christ may be found in other religions as well. He argued, moreover, that "[w]hen the Document declares, with the Second Vatican Council, that the only Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, it does not intend to express a disrespect for the other Churches and ecclesial communities."<sup>35</sup> Pope John Paul II's personal intervention is explained by the *Washington Post* as an attempt "to repair damage to relations with other religions caused by" *Dominus Iesus*.<sup>36</sup> However, even after the Pope's declaration, many still consider the Dictum as "a brake on ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue."<sup>37</sup>

The nearly universal reactions of dismay may be explained in several ways. First, indications by the Pope, with his growing interest in interreligious dialogue, from the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 1986 to the Interreligious Assembly held in the Vatican City late in 1999, had suggested that he was personally oriented toward a pluralistic atti-

30. Marco Politi, "Strappo tra ebrei e cattolici [A split between Jews and Catholics]," *Il Lunedì de La Repubblica* 7.38 (25 Sept. 2000): 22.

31. Di Leo, "Ma questo è un macigno sul dialogo," *Il Resto del Carlino* 115.243 (6 Sept. 2000): 2.

32. Politi, "Strappo tra ebrei e cattolici," *Il Lunedì de La Repubblica* 7.38 (25 Sept. 2000): 22.

33. Cf. Politi, "Strappo tra ebrei e cattolici," *Il Lunedì de La Repubblica* 7.38 (25 Sept. 2000): 22.

34. Di Leo, "Ma questo è un macigno sul dialogo," *Il Resto del Carlino* 115.243 (6 Sept. 2000): 2.

35. Pope John Paul II, quoted in Orazio La Rocca, "E Wojtyła esalta il dialogo 'Chiesa senza arroganza' [And Wojtyła exalts dialogue: 'A Church without arrogance']," *Il Lunedì de La Repubblica* 7.39 (2 Oct. 2000): 9.

36. Sarah Delaney, "Other Faiths Not Denied Salvation, Pope Says," *Washington Post* 2 Oct. 2000: A18.

37. La Rocca, "E Wojtyła esalta il dialogo," *Il Lunedì de La Repubblica* 7.39 (2 Oct. 2000): 9.

tude. This idea had been further encouraged by his many acts of repentance to those whom the Church had offended in the past. All these actions had created great hopes for the future. But now the inclusivist Dictum, signed by Cardinal Ratzinger and ratified by the Pope himself, has disappointed the expectations of everyone.

Second, as the strongest Church in the Christian world, the Catholic Church is inextricably connected with Western civilization that has been predominant in the world during the last few centuries. Western peoples have often perpetrated acts of conquest and tyranny against other peoples and religions in the name of Christianity. Many had hoped that the Catholic Church would renounce any attitude that might be reminiscent of the former arrogance of the Western Christian world toward the “others.” And they had been expecting that this renunciation and a softening of the most rigid points of Catholic doctrine would be done not only in words, but also in deeds.

Finally, the dimensions of the Catholic Church are so large that even an internal measure such as *Dominus Iesus* receives great attention from the press. What is addressed to the Catholics alone often comes to be considered as public, thus causing perplexity, dismay, and criticisms. Few people realize that the Church itself may be afflicted with internal tensions. As the American journalist R. Jeffrey Smith remarks:

38. Smith, “Vatican Claims Church Monopoly on Salvation,” *Washington Post Foreign Service* 6 Sept. 2000: A13.

39. “Eumenical Dialogue Is Intensified on Basis of Catholicism’s Very Identity: Reverend Angelo Amato Comments on ‘Dominus Iesus’ Declaration,” a dispatch by the international news agency Zenit, which may be found at <Zenit.org>.

As such, it [*Dominus Iesus*] reflects age-old Vatican anxieties about the dilution of Catholic authority, which Church officials maintain comes directly from God through the pope. It also may grow from a heightened concern by Church officials that Catholicism must remain competitive with Islam and other expanding faiths, particularly in East Asia and other battlegrounds for religious adherence in the developing world.<sup>38</sup>

Thus a document meant “to clarify Catholic identity” can be misunderstood as an expression of disrespect toward the other religions.<sup>39</sup>

***A Bahá’í Perspective: A Comparison between the Doctrinal Contents of the Declaration and the Bahá’í Teachings***

AS a religion that accepts the relativity of divinely revealed truth and strongly supports the world’s efforts on behalf of ecumenical principles, the Bahá’í Faith has a keen interest in the implications of such statements as *Dominus Iesus*. A Bahá’í may read the Declaration in two ways: in its doctrinal contents as compared with the Bahá’í teachings and in its meaning in view of interreligious dialogue.

If one compares the doctrinal contents of the Declaration with the Bahá’í teachings, it becomes apparent that the two Faiths have quite different perspectives. Some of the ideas that the Declaration condemns as “relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de jure* (or in principle)” (§4) are among the basic principles of the Bahá’í faith. Like the Catholic Church, the Bahá’í Faith also disproves

the radical opposition posited between the logical mentality of the West and the symbolic mentality of the East; the extremist subjectivism of those who regard reason as the only source of knowledge; . . . the eclecticism of those who, in theological research, absorb ideas from a variety of philosophical and theological con-

texts without regard for consistency, systematic connection, or compatibility with Christian [or any religious] truth.<sup>40</sup>

But unlike the Catholic Church (as reflected in the Declaration), the Bahá'í Faith approves "the conviction of the elusiveness and inexpressibility of divine truth; the relativistic attitudes toward truth itself, according to which what is true for some would not be true for others"; and obviously the Bahá'í Faith does not condemn "the tendency to read and to interpret sacred scripture outside the Tradition and Magisterium of the Church" (§4). Therefore, the Bahá'í attitude toward the six issues dealt with in the Declaration is quite different from that of the Catholic Church, as a brief examination of a few points may serve to illustrate.

*The Fullness and Definitiveness of the Revelation of Jesus Christ.* The Bahá'í beliefs on the fullness and definitiveness of the revelation of Jesus Christ are openly relativist and pluralist. Human beings cannot know absolute Truth. "The door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days [God] . . . [is] closed in the face of all beings," writes Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>41</sup> However, the Bahá'í scriptures teach that God guides humankind toward Truth, gradually, throughout the ages, through His messengers—that is, the founders of revealed religions, including, for example, Moses, Zarahustra, the Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, Bahá'u'lláh.

thustra, the Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, Bahá'u'lláh.

The messengers of God, in the Bahá'í view, are perfect creatures in their ability to comprehend and to convey the will of God to humanity in a given age. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, they

are the recipients and revealers of all the unchangeable attributes and names of God. They are the mirrors that truly and faithfully reflect the light of God. Whatsoever is applicable to them is in reality applicable to God, Himself, Who is both the Visible and the Invisible. The knowledge of Him, Who is the Origin of all things, and attainment unto Him, are impossible save through knowledge of, and attainment unto, these luminous Beings who proceed from the Sun of Truth. By attaining, therefore, to the presence of these holy Luminaries, the "Presence of God" Himself is attained. From their knowledge, the knowledge of God is revealed, and from the light of their countenance, the splendour of the Face of God is made manifest.<sup>42</sup>

The messengers of God certainly know absolute Truth. But none of them has conveyed or will ever convey that Truth to humankind in absolute terms. They reveal incrementally as much of it as is suited to the growing spiritual capacity of understanding of human beings. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Know of a certainty that in every Dispensation the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity."<sup>43</sup> He also writes: "O Son of Beauty! . . . All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice."<sup>44</sup> Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, explains that religious truth is not absolute but relative, . . . [and] Divine Revelation is orderly,

40. Intervention of Cardinal Ratzinger, Press Conference.

41. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) 99.

42. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 142–43. In the Bahá'í scriptures, the locution "Sun of Truth" is the Logos, the Word of God.

43. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) 87.

44. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, trans. Shoghi Effendi with the assistance of some English friends (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1939) A67.

continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final. Indeed, the categorical rejection by the followers of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh of the claim to finality which any religious system inaugurated by the Prophets of the past may advance is as clear and emphatic as their own refusal to claim that same finality for the Revelation with which they stand identified.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, the message of each messenger is perfectly calculated for the realization of its divinely assigned mission, but the capacity of each messenger is infinitely greater than those of other mortals. Bahá'u'lláh describes Jesus as "the face of God," "the Essence of Being and Lord of the visible and invisible."<sup>46</sup> He writes of Jesus as possessing more spiritual potency than the "deepest wisdom which the sages have uttered, the profoundest learning which any mind hath unfolded, the arts which the ablest hands have produced, the influence exerted by the most potent of rulers." All these, He says, "are but manifestations of the quickening power released by His [Christ's] transcendent, His all-pervasive, and resplendent Spir-

it."<sup>47</sup> Bahá'u'lláh also describes the revelation of Jesus as perfect, absolute, and full in itself, although it gave only a prescribed measure of divine guidance to humanity. Like all the other messengers of God, Christ revealed only what human beings could understand at that specific moment of their collective evolution on earth. Therefore, Jesus' revelation, while perfect, is not definitive or final; actually, three divine messengers of equal magnitude (Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh) have come to the world after Christ. And other messengers will come to the world "till *'the end that hath no end'*"; so that His [God's] grace may, from the heaven of Divine bounty, be continually vouchsafed to mankind."<sup>48</sup>

Thus, from the Bahá'í perspective, there is no reason to consider the faith in God of the Catholics as being different in quality from that of the followers of the other religions. Like the faith of the followers of any other religion, the faith of Catholics also involves a commitment to divinely ordained spiritual values, demonstrated in actions. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the eldest surviving son of Bahá'u'lláh and His designated successor, succinctly puts it, whatever the religion, faith is for each believer "first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds."<sup>49</sup> In the Bahá'í view, it is "true knowledge of God and the comprehension of divine words."<sup>50</sup> It is "the love that flows from man to God . . . attraction to the Divine, enkindlement, progress, entrance into the Kingdom of God, receiving the Bounties of God, illumination with the lights of the Kingdom."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, "[f]aith does not consist in belief, it consists in deeds."<sup>52</sup> Therefore, in the Bahá'í religious experience, the acceptance of metaphysical verities and dogmas fades into the background in comparison with any action consciously and willingly performed for the love of God in compliance with spiritual laws revealed in any of the Scriptures. Thus the Bahá'í concept of faith is

45. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, new ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991) 115.

46. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 19; Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 57.

47. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 85-86.

48. Bahá'u'lláh, "Súriy-i-Şabr" (Súrih of Patience), quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 116.

49. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdul Baha Abbas*, vol. 3 (New York: Bahai Publishing Society, 1909-16) 549.

50. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) 364.

51. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911*, 12th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995) 58.5.

52. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Abdul Baha on Divine Philosophy* (Boston: Tudor Press, 1918) 41.

quite different from that of *Dominus Iesus*, where faith in Jesus Christ, understood as the wholehearted assent to His revealed truth as formally and authoritatively explained by the Catholic Church, is preeminent in comparison with any good deed performed in the absence of such faith.

As to the meaning of the Scriptures of revealed religions, Shoghi Effendi states that the Revelation identified with Bahá'u'lláh . . . preserves inviolate the sanctity of . . . [the] authentic Scriptures [of the ancient religions], disclaims any intention of lowering the status of their Founders or of abating the spiritual ideals they inculcate, . . . reaffirms their common, their unchangeable and fundamental purpose, . . . readily and gratefully recognizes their respective contributions to the gradual unfoldment of one Divine Revelation, unhesitatingly acknowledges itself to be but one link in the chain of continually progressive Revelations. . . .<sup>53</sup>

Discussion of those ancient scriptures is acceptable to Bahá'ís, insofar as it aims to establish the extent to which surviving scriptural texts accurately convey the teachings of the various Messengers of God (always problematic because, with the exception of the Koran, the texts that survive were either not written down during their Messenger's lifetime, have been changed over the course of time, or are copies of lost originals). But, in the Bahá'í view, such discussions should remain purely academic, rather than be used to call into question the legitimacy or the great and positive influence exerted by all

scriptures on the development of human civilization. Bahá'ís desire that all sacred scriptures receive the deep, scientific, and respectful study that has been accorded the books of the Old and New Testament and the Koran. In the Bahá'í view, the authenticity and validity of Scriptures spring from the validity of their teachings and the fruits that they have produced in the hearts of their followers as well as in the societies that adopted them as their source of spiritual guidance.

*The Incarnate Logos and the Holy Spirit in the Work of Salvation.* From a Bahá'í perspective, Jesus and the Word are one and the same, but according to the Bahá'í teachings the same station is also true of the other Messengers. Bahá'u'lláh writes that

all the Prophets are the Temples of the Cause of God, Who have appeared clothed in divers attire. If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith. Such is the unity of those Essences of being, those Luminaries of infinite and immeasurable splendour.<sup>54</sup>

To Bahá'ís, the Holy Spirit operates in the world in at least two ways. The first is a “universal” way in which all things are “the recipients and revealers of the splendours of that ideal King,” and “nothing whatsoever can exist without the revelation of the splendour of God, the ideal King.”<sup>55</sup> The second is a particular way, channeled through all the Messengers of God, all of whom are “the recipients and revealers of all the unchangeable attributes and names of God. . . . [and are] the mirrors that truly and faithfully reflect the light of God,” so that “[t]he knowledge of Him, Who is the Origin of all things, and attainment unto Him, are impossible save through knowledge of, and attainment unto, these luminous Beings who proceed from the Sun of Truth.”<sup>56</sup>

53. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, intro. George Townshend, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, 1999 printing) 100.

54. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 153–54.

55. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 139, 140.

56. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 142.



*The Unicity and Universality of the Salvific Mystery of Jesus Christ.* Regarding the unicity and universality of the salvific mystery of Jesus Christ, Bahá'ís believe that each divine epiphany is a unique, universal and absolute historical event in relation to the age in which it is manifested and to its specific divinely assigned mission. However, it is not unique, universal, and absolute in relation to the other divine epiphanies, of which it is one part. Bahá'u'lláh explains that the messengers of God have two different aspects—"the station of essential unity" and "the station of distinction."<sup>57</sup> In their station of essential unity, the Messengers of God "are regarded as one soul and the same person. For they all drink from the one Cup of the love of God, and all partake of the fruit of the same Tree of Oneness."<sup>58</sup> In their station of distinction (or humanity) that

pertaineth to the world of creation and to the limitations thereof. . . . each Manifestation of God<sup>59</sup> hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined Revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfils a definite Mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation.<sup>60</sup>

Therefore, Jesus had a unique role in relation to that of the other messengers. But He also shares his divine nature with the other mes-

sengers and in this respect is identical to them. He is both the Son of God and the son of man. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that Jesus "founded the sacred Law on a basis of moral character and complete spirituality, and for those who believed in Him He delineated a special way of life which constitutes the highest type of action on earth."<sup>61</sup>

The Bahá'í teachings uphold religious pluralism not only *de facto* but also *de jure*. They consider each revealed religion as the fruit of an authentic divine revelation, equal to all the other religions in its essential aspects, such as the law of love and compassion, and different in its secondary aspects. The Bahá'í teachings uphold the unity of religions. They consider religious conflicts and disputes as the result of misunderstandings—misunderstandings that are often referred to as "religious prejudices." They call upon the followers of all religions to study with greater attention, respect, and objectivity the scriptures and the historical development of the other religions. They recommend that peoples of different religions cooperate with one another and establish strong ties of reciprocal friendship. They see harmony among religions as a goal the attainment of which is worth working for, in view of the benefits that will accrue therefrom to human civilization.

*The Unicity and Unity of the Catholic Church and the Close Relationship between the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Christ, and the Catholic Church.* The issues of the unicity and unity of the Catholic Church and of the close relationship between the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ, and the Catholic Church are of such a specific Catholic nature that it is difficult to express an opinion from the perspective of the Bahá'í Faith. Doing so would create the risk of engaging in an invasive discussion on religious issues of the kind that Bahá'u'lláh strongly recommends avoiding. He says: "The purpose of religion as revealed from the heaven of God's holy

57. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 176.

58. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 152.

59. The locution *Manifestation of God*, generally capitalized, is the most frequent term whereby the Bahá'í scriptures refer to the messengers of God, the founders of revealed religions.

60. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 176.

61. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, trans. Marzieh Gail in consultation with Ali-Kuli Khan, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990) 82.

Will is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife.”<sup>62</sup>

*The Relationship between the Catholic Church and Other Religions in Relation to Salvation.* The Bahá’í perspective on the relationship between the Catholic Church and other religions in relation to salvation is that all religions present a legitimate path to salvation. Followers of all religions might better spend their time answering those people who question the whole value and necessity of religion itself in the development of human civilization. On this issue John H. Hick, a leading philosopher of religion and interfaith dialogue, has written:

Whether . . . [the various religious traditions] were more or less equally valid human responses to the Real cannot be answered *a priori* but only on the basis of observing their fruits. In my opinion the true answer is that, so far as we can tell, the great traditions exhibit a rough salvific parity. They seem to be more or less equally productive of the outstanding individuals whom we call saints, more or less equally effective in providing a framework of meaning within which spiritual growth can take place, and also more or less unsuccessful in transforming societies on any large scale—for it is, alas, so much easier for evil than for good to be institutionalized.<sup>63</sup>

A Bahá’í response to the claim that all religions have been “more or less unsuccessful in transforming societies on any large scale”

is that each religion has its own mission and that the transforming effect of each should be judged in the light of its particular mission. Given the characteristics of earlier ages, no ancient religion seems to have had the mission of bringing peace and unity to the whole of humankind, a goal that was, if anything, part of an eschatological vision intended for a remote end of time. However, over the course of the centuries the organization of society has undeniably improved. Whereas humanist philosophers would ascribe this development only to the growth of the human rational faculty, Bahá’ís ascribe it mainly to the precious contributions of all the revealed religions of the world. According to the Bahá’í teachings, without the assistance and the inspiration of the teachings of all the messengers of God, the best spiritual principles and virtues of humankind would have remained hidden and unattained for the human race. The three Zoroastrian commandments (goodly thoughts, goodly words, and goodly deeds), the “ten words” of Moses, the words of Jesus’ Sermon on the mount, indeed, the spiritual teachings of all the revealed religions are the outcome of divine revelation, not the fruit of human conscience. Rather, in the Bahá’í view, human conscience is the fruit of the divine knowledge taught by all the messengers of God, absorbed by human beings, and deposited in such deep strata of their memory that it almost seems an inborn asset.

***A Bahá’í Perspective:  
The Meaning of the Declaration in  
Respect to Interreligious Dialogue***

COMPARING Bahá’í beliefs with those in the Declaration is not intended to open a theological discussion or to polemicize but to emphasize the meaning of the author’s, and no doubt other Bahá’ís’, position supporting continued interreligious dialogue.

Bahá’ís do not feel “declassed” because the Declaration says that Catholicism is the only

62. Bahá’u’lláh, “*Ishráqát*” (Splendors), *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988) 129.

63. John H. Hick, “Interfaith and Future,” *Bahá’í Studies Review* 4.1 (1994): 7.

way toward salvation; that all the other religions are human creations, at most reflecting a glimmer of the light of Christ; and that all the other scriptures, by implication the Bahá'í scriptures among them, were not revealed by God but are the fruit of human minds. These statements are a matter of internal affairs of the Catholic Church. As Politi remarks:

the darts of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith seem directed mainly against European and Asian theologians, who in the last years have been trying to understand how the “salvific power” of God operates also in the other religious traditions. It is an intricate theological issue and in point of fact the declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of

the Faith does not introduce anything new.<sup>64</sup>

The Catholic Church has simply reaffirmed well-known concepts, in front of her believers. The Declaration is not addressed to the leaders or the followers of other religions. It has reached them simply because the dimensions of the Church are such that her official acts, be they internal or external, are always widely covered by the press.

The basis of the intense Bahá'í support for continuing interreligious dialogue is a statement by Bahá'u'lláh that says: “Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.”<sup>65</sup> This attitude of “friendliness and fellowship” is not taught as conditional upon any previous agreement on theological issues. Interreligious dialogue is now a viable process, but it is important that all those who want to promote this dialogue remember that their starting point, not so long ago, was religious exclusivism, a position that has lasted for centuries and has implied that other religions must be abhorred, shunned, and fought. While the Declaration reminds its addressees that the other religions “contain ‘gaps, insufficiencies and errors’”<sup>66</sup> (§8), it also states that the Church considers these religions with “sincere respect” (§22). Moreover, the Declaration calls for a continuing theological debate on the meaning of the other religions. As the Reverend Amato says: “only the roads leading to blind-alleys have been closed.”<sup>67</sup>

With the Second Vatican Council of 1963–65, the Catholic Church advanced from exclusivism toward inclusivism. In other words, inclusivistic Catholics said: “Our religion is the best among all, and it is worth bearing witness to its beauty, but a seed of truth may be found in the other religions as well.” The Declaration signed by Cardinal Ratzinger occurs within this new stage of interreligious dialogue. However, many people are anxious to see all religions and their institutions proceeding to a third stage, that of pluralism:

64. Politi, “Ratzinger: ‘Salvezza solo nella Chiesa cattolica,’” *La Repubblica* 25.206 (6 Sept. 2000): 11. Enzo Bianchi mentions theologians like “Knitter and Hick” (“Il difficile dialogo con le Chiese sorelle,” *La Repubblica* 25.208 (8 Sept. 2000): 16. Paul F. Knitter is Professor of Theology at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, and an eminent proponent of liberation theology. The Italian journalist Luigi Accattoli suggests in particular three names: “a number of Asian theologians like Aloysius Pieris and Tissa Balasuriya from Sri Lanka, or Raimundo Panikkar (half Spanish and half Indian)” (“Dal ‘peccato originale’ al rito del battesimo: Le idee dei teologi asiatici che Roma contesta [“From ‘original sin’ to the ritual of baptism: The ideas of Asian theologians called in question by Rome”],” *Il Corriere della Sera* 125.211 (6 Sept. 2000): 11. Aloysius Pieris is an Indian Jesuit theologian. The Sri Lankan Father Tissa Balasuriya is a member of the monastic order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, excommunicated in 1997 and reinstated in 1998 after he had partially recanted his doctrines. Raimundo Panikkar is a Spanish-Indian religious scholar.

65. Bahá'u'lláh, “Lawḥ-i-Dunyá” (Tablet of the World), *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 87.

66. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 55; cf. 56 and Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 53 (§8).

67. Intervention of the Reverend Amato, Press Conference.

the view that all religions come from the one God of all humankind.<sup>68</sup>

But even the inclusivistic second stage has many advantages. Ideally, the followers of all religions could even now accept each other's inclusivistic attitudes, in the name of the common spiritual ethical principle in all Scriptures ("Do not do unto others, what you would not be done to you") that religious scholars have discovered, though worded in slightly different terms. In other words, each believer could say: "As I believe in my religion, love my religion, and consider it as the best among all, thus, in the name of the Golden Rule that my own religion teaches, I willingly accept that the 'others' may have the same attitude toward their own religion, even if I think that they err." This attitude would contribute to ending interreligious conflict without disclaiming the missionary spirit typical of most religions. While all religions say that their believers should bear witness to their faith, no religion teaches that its believers should impose their faith upon the others in their behavior; all believers are enjoined to perform their missionary activities with courtesy, respect, and love and to

profess only to those who show themselves inclined to this kind of dialogue.

The consequences of religious disputes and disagreements are ruinous. These disputes have caused many people to turn their backs on religion: to think that religion is a divisive force that cannot guarantee individual freedom and that it should be strictly kept away from the political domain. It is a lesson to all believers that a secularist, the Italian political leader, Giuliano Amato, should have reminded them of their foremost duty:

For war to be abandoned . . . the staunch commitment of all believers is required. "Religions know the ways of the hearts. They are requested to root out hate and fear of the Others, which are the ultimate cause of all wars. It must not happen . . . that in the name of religion someone may see the Others as a sign of the evil, instead of recognizing them as a sign of God."<sup>69</sup>

But if all believers could now respect each other's beliefs and give the freedom to profess them, they could finally achieve together what the world is wanting from them: that they set aside their theological disputes and cooperate to promote their highest common religious values (the law of love and compassion and, at least, the four ethical principles on which most of them agreed during the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions: do not kill; do not steal; do not lie; and do not commit sexual immorality.<sup>70</sup>

The power of faith is very great. Great results could be expected if believers of all religions would merge their various personal faiths into one common effort: to bear witness to these common values in their actions and to promote them throughout the world. The need for interreligious cooperation is urgent in that many of the problems that cause great suffering among the peoples of the world occur because those principles are mostly being ignored. As Albert Lincoln, Secretary-General of the Bahá'í International Community,<sup>71</sup> said in a statement to the

68. Knitter writes that pluralism has become "a common perspective among Catholic theologians today. In different forms it is represented by H. Küng, H. R. Schlette, M. Hellwig, W. Bühlmann, A. Camps, P. Schoonenberg" ("La teologia cattolica delle religioni a un crocevia ["Catholic theology of religions at the crossroads"]," *Concilium* 22 [1986], 138).

69. Politi, "Strappo tra ebrei e cattolici," *Il Lunedì de La Repubblica* 7.38 (25 Sept. 2000): 22.

70. The Parliament of the World's Religions, *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*, Parliament of the World's Religions, August 28–September 5, 1993, Chicago, IL, U.S.A. The text can be retrieved from the website of the Stiftung Weltethos in Germany in English or in German. See also: <http://astro.temple.edu/~dialogue/Center/kung.htm>

71. The official name of the worldwide Bahá'í community in its relationship with the outside world.

Millennium World Peace Summit, held in New York on 28–31 August 2000: “If there must be competition among religions, let each strive to excel in guiding people to peaceful coexistence, moral rectitude and mutual understanding.”

The urgency of interreligious dialogue is apparently perceived by all who advocate it and persist in their activities undeterred by any doctrinal consideration. As the Reverend Amato himself said in the course of an interview on *Dominus Iesus* disseminated by the international news agency Zenit: “Dialogue is founded . . . on reciprocal identity: this does not mean a lack of respect in relations with other religions, but only an expression of our own identity. The dialogue can then converge on many aspects: on peace, cooperation, international solidarity, harmony

among peoples, ecology, etc.”<sup>72</sup> Politi, while describing an interreligious meeting promoted by the Community of St. Egidio<sup>73</sup> held in Lisbon after the Holy See had issued *Dominus Iesus*, relates that Andrea Riccardi, the leader of St. Egidio, evoked “the dream of a ‘celestial council of religions,’” whereas Jose Policarpo, the Patriarch of Lisbon, proclaimed “during the Mass that ‘there is but one true God, in whom all of us believe, whose face all of us are looking for, in the hope of finding the definitive light which emanates from harmony and peace.’”<sup>74</sup> The Italian journalist also relates that Monsignor Lubomyr Husar, the Greek-Catholic Bishop of Leopoldis, pronounced, in the course of the same meeting, a view that:

The plurality of religions and confessions is not a religious, but an historical fact. My opinion is that all existing monotheistic religions, which accept one God as the origin, the legislator and the father of all humankind, are in reality one religion, which has experienced a number of divisions in the course of time.<sup>75</sup>

To the Bahá’ís who observe them, these efforts can seem to be an early realization of the condition described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1913:

When the devotees of religion cast aside their dogmas and ritualism, the unification of religion will appear on the horizon and the verities of the holy books will become unveiled. In these days superstitions and misunderstandings are rife; when these are relinquished the sun of unity shall dawn.<sup>76</sup>

72. “Ecumenical dialogue is intensified on basis of Catholicism’s very identity: Reverend Angelo Amato comments on ‘Dominus Iesus’ Declaration,” a dispatch by the international news agency Zenit, which may be found at <Zenit.org>.

73. A lay movement of the Roman quarter of Trastevere active in the field of interreligious dialogue and peace. Sometimes Italian journalists refer to it as “Trastevere’s UN.”

74. Politi, “Strappo tra ebrei e cattolici,” *Il Lunedì de La Repubblica* 7.38 (25 Sept. 2000): 22.

75. Politi, “Vaticano, prime crepe sulla linea Ratzinger,” *La Repubblica* 25.221 (26 Sept. 2000): 18.

76. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Abdul-Baha on Divine Philosophy* 153.