

**GOD'S UNIVERSAL GRACE TO CREATION AND  
EVANGELIZATION IN A RELIGIOUSLY PLURALISTIC  
SOCIETY**

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**Abstract**

*The increasing awareness of religious pluralism in the twenty-first century prompts an exploration of the necessity, nature, and methodologies of evangelization. This inquiry has gained traction with the recognition that God's universal grace, freely granted to creation, is not exclusive to the Christian faith. Adherents of other religions equally share in and partake of God's unconditional grace. The spirit of God operates where it chooses, and indeed, all individuals are called within their respective faiths to live righteously and in harmony with creation. Given that followers of other religions can attain salvation by adhering to the fundamental principles of their beliefs and conscience, and that God's grace is also manifest within these faiths, the question of the necessity of evangelization becomes increasingly significant. Is missionary work rendered obsolete due to the possibility of salvation across diverse faiths? If evangelization remains essential, what methods ought to be employed? The objective of the paper is to establish that, though God's grace is universally available to all, given the uniqueness of Jesus Christ through whom God saves creation, Christianity occupies a unique position among other religions. Other religions contain vestiges of God's grace and as such, are salvific. Consequently, the methodology for evangelization must take into cognizance God's grace operative in these religions.*

**Keywords:** Religious Pluralism, Grace, Evangelization, Salvation.

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## 1. Introduction

Pope Francis, during an interreligious meeting with young people in Singapore, made an important remark on a contentious issue on evangelization. In the said address, he opined, ‘All religions are paths to God. I will use an analogy; they are like different languages that express the divine. But God is for everyone, and therefore, we are all God’s children. ‘But my God is more important than yours!’ Is this true? There is only one God, and religions are like languages, paths to reach God.’<sup>2</sup> The pope’s remarks sparked a firestorm among Christians who had literally believed Jesus’ teaching when he said, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me’ (Jn 14:6). The French theologian Jacques Dupuis was sanctioned by the Church when he published *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* in 1997. The book had made similar assertions regarding other religious traditions being paths to salvation without Christ.

The Vatican doctrinal office, currently named Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, was so alarmed by Dupuis’ publication that it had to issue a Notification on the book. The Notification pushed back on Dupuis’ publication when it inter alia says,

In accordance with Catholic doctrine, it must be held that ‘whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions, serves as a preparation for the Gospel (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 16).’ It is therefore legitimate to maintain that the Holy Spirit accomplishes salvation in non-Christians also through those elements of truth and goodness present in the various religions; however, to hold that these religions, considered as such, are ways of salvation, has no foundation in Catholic theology, also because they contain omissions, insufficiencies and errors regarding fundamental truths about God, man and the world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, “Interreligious meeting with young people,” Holy See. September 13, 2024.

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/september/documents/20240913-singapore-giovani.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Card. Ratzinger, and Tarcisio Bertone, *NOTIFICATION on the book Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism, Congregation for the Doctrine of the*

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The Notification goes further to emphasize the uniqueness of Christ in the salvation of humanity.

Furthermore, the fact that the elements of truth and goodness present in the various world religions may prepare peoples and cultures to receive the salvific event of Jesus Christ does not imply that the sacred texts of these religions can be considered as complementary to the Old Testament, which is the immediate preparation for the Christ event.<sup>4</sup>

Given the foregoing, what are Christians to make of Pope Francis' statement that all religions offer a path to God? Has the Church tacitly accepted the position of Dupuis? It is worth noting that Pope Francis emphasized the importance of respecting all religions and acknowledging the reality of religious pluralism. Thus, the ever-increasing awareness of the reality of religious pluralism in the twenty-first century calls into question the necessity, nature, and methods of evangelization. Correlated to this is the realization that God's universal grace, freely bestowed on creation, is not a monopoly of the Christian religion. People of other religions equally share and participate in God's gratuitous grace. The spirit of God blows where it wills (Jn 3:8), and indeed everyone is called in their own religion to live righteously and in harmony with creation.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) teaches that 'Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience - those too may achieve eternal salvation.'<sup>5</sup> Granted that people of other religions can be saved and attain salvation if they follow the right dictates of their religion and that God's grace is also operative in these religions, the question of the necessity for evangelization becomes more pungent. Is missionary activity over since people can be saved in their different religions? If evangelization is necessary, what methods should be adopted? To help us attend to these questions and more, the paper will

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*Faith.* #8. January 24, 2001. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20010124\\_dupuis\\_en.html#\\_ftn16](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010124_dupuis_en.html#_ftn16)

<sup>4</sup> Ratzinger, *Notification*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, 847

adopt the following format: a) a brief excursus on the reality of religious pluralism, b) an examination of God's universal grace to all creation; c) evangelization in a religious pluralistic society; d) a conclusion.

## **2. The Reality of Religious Pluralism**

Religious pluralism is a reality that cannot be denied or wished away. It is almost impossible to find a religiously homogeneous society. Though not without its unfortunate and attendant hydra-headed problems (violence, intolerance, bigotry, etc.), and demands for religious freedom and diversity, religious pluralism has become one of the characteristics of today's world.<sup>6</sup> To think that all people would practice and adhere to one religion is to live in the past.

David Tracy, a protagonist of pluralism, argues that religious pluralism is a welcome development because it enriches and allows us to learn incomparably more about reality by disclosing different ways of viewing both our common human experience and Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Enunciating the positive contribution of religious pluralism to our society, Tracy discloses that 'The pluralism of cultural worlds has enriched us all with new visions of our common lives and new possibilities for an authentic life. Yet it does so at a price we can seldom face with equanimity. For each of us seems to become not a single self but several selves at once.'<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Pope John Paul II, in his cautious and qualified approval of pluralism, says A legitimate plurality of positions has yielded to undifferentiated pluralism, based upon the assumption that all positions are equally valid, which is one of today's most widespread symptoms of the lack of confidence in truth. Even certain conceptions of life coming from the East betray this lack of confidence, denying truth its exclusive character and assuming that truth reveals itself equally in different doctrines, even if they contradict one another.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Jacques, Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. (Orbis books, 1997), 10.

<sup>7</sup> David, Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, (The University of Chicago press, 1975), 3.

<sup>8</sup> David, Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, (Crossroad, 1981), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical Letter, #5

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The pope, while not condemning religious pluralism, is concerned that it could lead to relativism, which suggests that truth is relative and that no single religious tradition possesses the absolute truth about God. The Pope's concerns are legitimate and important. Unrestricted pluralism could lead to relativism, which relativizes truth while accepting all positions as equally true. Thus, Anthony Lusvardi makes a point when he contends that 'fidelity to Christian revelation will sometimes involve maintaining certain theological tensions and living, in specific cases, with uncertainty. The fact that no one is in principle excluded from salvation does not mean that conversion is any less necessary.'<sup>10</sup>

Religious pluralism challenges missionaries and evangelizers not to view people of other religions as those who have hardened their hearts against the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ or the grace of God. To insist on the same response to the grace of God is to argue for uniformity, which refuses to respect differences and pluralism. Nevertheless, the affirmation of religious pluralism calls into question how Christianity views other religions, especially as it concerns God's universal plan of salvation. Is 'outside the Church, there is no salvation' still tenable? Is one religion as good as another? Is missionary activity over in the face of religious pluralism? If not, how do you carry on the missionary mandate of proclaiming the Good News to all creation (Mk 15:16), amid plural religions that equally lay claim to the same truth about God? Does Christianity possess the absolute truth of God, grace, and questions of ultimate realities? Is God's grace operative in other religious traditions? Dupuis, responding to these questions, notes that the theology of religious pluralism explores the positive significance other religious traditions have

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony, Lusvardi, *Is there salvation outside baptism? A better way of looking at a difficult question*, America Magazine, August 12, 2025. [https://www.americamagazine.org/faith-and-reason/2025/08/12/salvation-unbaptized-desire/?utm\\_source=ActiveCampaign&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=Is%20there%20salvation%20outside%20baptism%3F%20A%20better%20way%20of%20looking%20at%20a%20difficult%20question&utm\\_campaign=Daily%2008%2012%2025&vgo\\_cc=YsvRY3xW73DHS8DRZyE1x82x1hWNEGRZ4oS96yAGaEeNiuwl%3A7aDOR11TCAAoBou08Y1WXSh6hHUPGrCf](https://www.americamagazine.org/faith-and-reason/2025/08/12/salvation-unbaptized-desire/?utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Is%20there%20salvation%20outside%20baptism%3F%20A%20better%20way%20of%20looking%20at%20a%20difficult%20question&utm_campaign=Daily%2008%2012%2025&vgo_cc=YsvRY3xW73DHS8DRZyE1x82x1hWNEGRZ4oS96yAGaEeNiuwl%3A7aDOR11TCAAoBou08Y1WXSh6hHUPGrCf)

in God's plan of salvation in the context of the universal value, which the Christian faith attributes to Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

The increased awareness of the reality of pluralism and the recognition by the Church that people of other religions could attain salvation through the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God<sup>12</sup> have led to a critical examination of the necessity for mission and missionary methodology. Our concern is how to proclaim the Good News, cognizant of the fact that the ultimate calling of each one comes from God through the Holy Spirit, who offers everyone the possibility of salvation. We will extrapolate these questions and concerns in the next section.

### **3. God's Universal Grace in Creation**

Grace, God's gift of his presence, power, and redemption to creation, is a fundamental article of Christian faith. The Church believes that with the corruption of human nature by sin, God, who created all freely, and because he loves everyone unconditionally, also redeems all unconditionally. God does this by his free, unmerited universal grace. This gratuitous grace enables human beings everywhere, and at every age, to become more fully humanized and humane.<sup>13</sup> God, in his own free and unconditional love, makes Himself present and carries out his work of cosmic creation and salvation freely, without help from his creatures. For St Augustine, grace is 'that without which neither infants nor adults can be saved. It is not given on account of good work performed by anyone, which in itself is the work of grace, but is given gratis, on account of which it is called grace. Grace does not relate to the constitution of human nature but restoration to its pristine condition.'<sup>14</sup> Grace, therefore, is that which enables human beings to cooperate with God in the work of redemption and to perform good works.

According to the Scripture, the cosmic divine work is universally carried out through the divine mind or Logos (Jn 1-3; 10:9, 14:6-11). This being

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<sup>11</sup> Dupuis, *Toward*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, #22.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel, Twesigye, *African Religion, Philosophy and Christianity in Logos-Christ: Common Ground Revisited* (Peter Lang, 1996), 73.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, Saint, *On Nature and Grace. A Treatise on Nature and Grace, Against Pelagius*. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1503.htm> ch.3, 12, 4/04/25

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the case, all human beings, irrespective of their religious affiliations, are created and redeemed by God's universal grace. This grace is operative everywhere in creation through the Logos or Christ. The Church as such is a part of God's channel of grace and salvation. Hence, God's activities of cosmic redemption are universal, free, and not limited to the Christian historical Church's work, sacraments, or membership.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the conclusion to be drawn is that the thesis: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is untenable. One does not necessarily have to be a member of the Church to participate in God's universal grace and salvation. Also, membership in the Church does not guarantee salvation; it could foster it. To hold that unless one becomes a Christian, such a person could not be saved is to hold an exclusivist position, which undermines and is contrary to God's universal and unmerited grace. This position does not in any way detract from the fact that Christ, the incarnate Logos made human, is the universal saviour of all people.

Vatican Council II affirms the possibility of non-Christians attaining salvation in their various religions if they follow the right dictates of their religions. The Council notes: 'For all peoples comprise a single community, and have a single origin since God made the whole race of men (and women) dwell over the entire face of the earth. One also is their final goal: God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, and His saving designs extend to all men.'<sup>16</sup> The Council went further to state in another document: 'Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life thanks to His grace.'<sup>17</sup> These Council declarations marked a watershed in the Church's perception and relationship to people of other religions. The Church acknowledges that salvation is possible outside the Church, quite unlike in the past when

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<sup>15</sup> Twesigye, *African Religion*, 74.

<sup>16</sup> Vatican Council II. *Nostra Aetate*. #1.

<sup>17</sup> Vatican Council II. *Lumen Gentium*. #16.

other religions were perceived to be ‘groping in the dark’ and in need of rescue.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4. Evangelization in a Religiously Pluralistic Society**

Our central concern here is not whether evangelization is still necessary in the face of religious pluralism, but what should be the nature and method of evangelization in a multicultural and pluralistic religious society. This paper will examine and re-evaluate some of the methods and paradigms of evangelization.

##### ***Witness***

An authentic witness to the gospel as a method of evangelization is very fundamental and essential in a religiously pluralistic society. By witness, Christians and evangelizers actively and silently demonstrate the grace of God, which has been poured out on them through Christ. People are more receptive to witnesses who live out what they preach and teach than to those who offer empty words that don’t reflect their lives. Pope Paul VI, emphasizing the crucial role of witness in evangelization, states, ‘It is through this wordless witness that Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one.’<sup>19</sup>

Witnessing as a method of evangelization involves identifying with the poor, oppressed, marginalized, and suffering, irrespective of their religious affiliations. It calls for a ‘preferential option’ for the poor, a commitment to work toward the attainment of peace, social justice, promotion of the common good, human rights and human dignity, etc. Witnessing also involves working against all structures of oppression, and courageous and prophetic stands in the face of corrupt political and economic powers.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, authentic witnessing entails that all claims to the truth about God’s grace and salvation must be reflected in the lives of those who profess it. Since the essence of God’s grace and presence is to elevate the

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<sup>18</sup> Vatican Council II. *Lumen Gentium*. #16

<sup>19</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation. #21.

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II. *Redemptoris Missio*. #42.

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status of humanity and restore it to its pristine state, witnessing to God's grace, therefore, must seek to achieve this goal. Authentic witnessing does not engage in contentious disputations about who is right or wrong in their religious beliefs, who is saved or not saved, but strives to make concrete and real in the lives of all people God's universal grace.

### ***Proclamation***

As the evangelizer bears witness to God's universal grace in creation, it is expedient and necessary that they witness what they proclaim and invite others to fellowship without any form of coercion. The Church is missionary in character and, therefore, for evangelization to be complete and true, it must not end with witnessing. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, and the kingdom of the mystery of Jesus, the Son of God are not proclaimed. Proclamation, Paul VI avers, 'must contain a foundation, center and at the same time summit of its dynamism—a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God's grace and mercy.'<sup>21</sup> Consequently, evangelization entails proclaiming in unambiguous terms what you believe and why you believe it. Proclamation does not condemn those who do not accept or share the same beliefs and faith.

### ***Dialogue***

Correlated with Proclamation is Dialogue in the process of evangelization. In a global and pluralistic society such as ours, dialogue as a tool for evangelization requires a constructive engagement with people of other religions through interreligious dialogue. It does not involve compromising one's faith and beliefs or accepting other religions as equal to Christianity. Among other things, it affirms the reality of pluralism and encourages mutual coexistence. In interreligious dialogue, each participant shares their understanding of God, grace, and salvation, among other topics. David Tracy provides an insightful structure for interreligious dialogue, stating: 'Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean;

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<sup>21</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #27. John Paul II takes up this theme in *Redemptoris Missio* #44-45. For John Paul II, just as the whole economy of salvation has its center in Christ, so too all missionary activities are directed to the proclamation of this mystery.

say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, confront if demanded, endure necessary conflict, and change your mind if the evidence suggests it.’

The main point is that dialogue should help partners understand each other and appreciate differences and similarities. Such dialogue can also lead to a change of stance. Dialogue becomes ‘a dialogue of the deaf’ when partners do not listen to one another, each being preoccupied with presenting their own position. We believe that genuine interreligious dialogue can serve as a remedy for some of the difficulties and challenges posed by religious pluralism in our society. Since doctrinal differences continue to widen the gap between religions and often lead to disputes and violence, it is not helpful to start this dialogue focused on those differences. Experience has shown that interreligious dialogue is most fruitful when issues that cross religious boundaries—such as justice, peace, hunger, disease, violence, and war—become the focal points. In support of this, John Paul II argues that interreligious dialogue should be based on ‘dialogue of life, hope and love, which should help all build a more just and fraternal society.’ Similarly, Avery Dulles suggests that starting with the most sensitive and disputed issues is not necessary. He believes that parties ‘will generally do better to begin with topics on which there is promise of achieving a significant measure of consensus,’<sup>22</sup> such as religious freedom, human brotherhood, sound culture, social welfare, and civil order. It is also possible to have meaningful dialogue on religious themes like the value of prayer and the nature of mystical experience, which seem to occur similarly across different traditions. Very fruitful conversations could also explore suffering, happiness, life, death, speech, and silence.<sup>23</sup>

Engaging in dialogue on these issues and others like them can help establish trust between partners. Once this trust is built, doctrinal topics—such as the mystery of God’s grace, salvation, and Jesus as the universal saviour of humankind—can be introduced. Conversion as a method of

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<sup>22</sup> Avery Dulles, *Christ Among*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

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evangelization, primarily to convert 'pagans' and those who do not believe in Jesus Christ, is unacceptable in a society marked by religious diversity. This approach appears arrogant and ignorant. It is ultimately God who grants conversion to whomever God wills. Since the Spirit blows where it wills (Jn 3:8), no one should assume the role of the Holy Spirit in trying to convert others. It is indefensible to attempt to convert people by force or coercion. Faith and acceptance of God's grace must be freely given. Efforts to force conversions can be counterproductive and have historically contributed to religious bigotry, violence, hatred, indifference, irreligion, and the outright condemnation of cultures.

### **5. Conclusion**

Christianity is missionary in character. Its mission *Ad gentes* derived from the mandate of Christ, to go to all nations and proclaim the Good News, must be sustained. For us Christians, Jesus remains the one universal saviour of humanity. In him God became incarnate and through him, all people will be saved. The manner through which God saves and redeems remains a mystery known only to God. Bearing this in mind, evangelizers must recognize that all claims to the universality of Jesus Christ as the one mediator of God's grace have to be related to the fact that no religion, including Christianity, will be the single religion of humankind.

Religious plurality is a reality that evangelizers must embrace and grapple with. It would be naïve and an effort in futility to think that all people would come one day to embrace the Christian religion. Plurality, therefore, should not be construed as an evil that must be obliterated, but rather a wealth, which should be celebrated. Awareness of this facticity calls on all to have what Paul Knitter calls 'a personal existential awareness' of the other. By this, he means 'to experience and feel the beauty, authenticity, power, inspiration, and truth of another religious tradition, not in books or films but in friendship, community, etc.'<sup>24</sup>

Religious pluralism challenges us to learn from other religious traditions how God's grace operates in them, in what ways they are salvific, their perception of reality, and claims to truth. Evangelization is not just about

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<sup>24</sup>Knitter, Paul, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Orbis, 1996), 28.

proclaiming the Good News in abstract terms; God's universal grace to all people becomes tangible when evangelizers work toward peaceful and mutual coexistence among different religious traditions. Additionally, the methodology of evangelization we discussed, particularly dialogue, should help us 'recognize the other as the other, the different as different and also to acknowledge other worlds of meaning as in some manner, a possible option for myself.'<sup>25</sup> When witnessing, if dialogue and proclamation establish trust by showing their purpose is not to convert the other, then any discussion on doctrinal aspects of religion, God's presence, and grace can be meaningful and fruitful.

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<sup>25</sup> David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 40.