

Ancient Philosophy as a Model for Intercultural 'Ecumenism'

Christian Gobel, B.A., M.Phil., Ph.L., drs. theol., Ph.D., a native of Brilon (Germany), teaches philosophy at Assumption College, Worcester, MA (USA); in addition, he is a visiting professor at the Catholic University of Eichstaett (Germany); he also taught at different Pontifical universities in Rome and spent a term at Salesian College Sonada (2007). He has authored or edited five books and numerous articles.

Abstract

Christian Göbel looks into the 'origins of ecumenical thought in Greek philosophy,' in the first part, as to supplement and energize the tradition of the 'ecumenical logic of Christian Faith' with an ecumenical philosophy as more compatible for promoting the authentic and original vision of the Gospels in the second part of this article. He argues very cogently and elaborately that there was an 'original stance of openness toward all humanity' among the stoic philosophers which could be similar to the premise of intrinsic ecumenical openness of Christian faith based also on the common nature of a human person grounded in reason.

Keywords: Ecumenism, Inter-culturality, Christian faith, Stoic philosophy

Introduction

Ecumenism is an example of the relevance of Ancient Philosophy for contemporary life (even if this might not be immediately obvious). I have chosen it, because it brings Ancient Philosophy into a concrete context which perfectly fits, I think, into the situation at Sonada: it is one of the most important endeavors in the Church and brings philosophy and theology and faith together. Moreover, ecumenism needs education; and education is a prime mission of the Salesians as well as of other religious communities active in this area. For the Greeks, however, 'ecumenism' is not only inter-religious (or inter-Christian) but *intercultural encounter*. My being here is already some kind of 'inter-cultural encounter' but, more so, the general situation in India and in Darjeeling District in particular reflect the universe of today's inter-religious and inter-cultural encounter: between the many peoples, nations, tribes – all with their own languages –, cultures, civilizations, and religions that live together in this rich country and region. It is an exemplary model for 'Westerners' like me; but it might also be interesting for Indians to hear some theoretical considerations from a 'Western perspective' about something that is part of their daily life. As a precondition for a true dialogue with others (non-Christians), we constantly need to reflect on and get a clear idea about our own identity in the first place. The question of identity is important in an ecumenical and inter-cultural context; and it is crucial how we define identity. Christianity is an example (and maybe an inspiration, even politically, especially as the situation here in Darjeeling begins to get difficult again) of a *non-exclusive* identity; Christian identity implies, in itself, '*ecumenical openness*'.

While I can't go into detail regarding concrete measures to be taken, I will emphasize the fact that ecumenism starts with a state of mind, an ecumenical stance. It is my goal to highlight this with regard to the Greeks and to Christianity. In spite of the present political difficulties, concrete measures in religious ecumenism have already been taken in Darjeeling District: activities already started include an inter-faith forum. And wherever ecumenical initiatives are taken, this proves that there are at least some people with 'ecumenical minds'. However, what remains a constant task is the *educational work*, which is the true realization of ecumenism, the work with individuals, trying to convince them – and first of all the individual members of my *own* group or culture or religion – that ecumenism is reasonable, trying to demonstrate the meaning and importance of an ecumenical open-mindedness. This dialectics between individual and society is something we can learn from the Greeks. For, their 'ecumenism' starts with self-knowledge; social ethics and even political visions are rooted in individual ethics. *This* is my – and the Greeks' – most important contribution to the question of method and measures of ecumenism: *education of the individual*. It is my hope that the following reflections can give some further foundation and inspiration for this work and thus strengthen the activities already started, against all those who, even in India and even among Christians, still oppose such activities. Ultimately, a mind trained in ecumenical openness in the field of religion will also be able to see the importance of 'political ecumenism'; this attitude can't be confined to religion but may also become 'political'.

The first part will present the origins of ecumenism in the Stoic School, outlining the exemplarity but also the limitations of Stoic ecumenism. One reason for its limited value is a moral misunderstanding of religion which can even be found in the history of Christianity in the form of a "moral God" who grants salvation according to the moral performance of the individual. This idea is one of the major obstacles to ecumenism, for it is generally associated with the idea of an exclusive claim to salvation. After briefly discussing this, I will present an alternative model of 'ecumenical mind' in Greek philosophy: Aristippus of Cyrene.

The second part will further discuss, correct and reject the moral misunderstanding of religion from a Christian perspective whose intrinsic logic consists in an unconditional openness towards others, which is truly ecumenical; taking up the foundations laid in Part One, my conclusion will propose an "ecumenical philosophy".

I

The Origins of Ecumenical Thought in Greek Philosophy

In many respects, Christian theology is influenced by Ancient Philosophy. Greek metaphysics – together with the Jewish-Jesuan faith – contributed to the elaboration of the theological system of Christianity, e.g. crossing Greek *logos* with the *logos* incarnate in Jesus Christ. Christian doctrine is not conceivable without Plato and Neo-Platonism,

the Hellenistic schools, especially Stoicism, or Aristotle and his school. And in a more 'practical' (cf. *praxis*) sense, the monastic fathers continued the 'ascetic' way of life practiced in the philosophical schools of Greece and Rome: an existence dedicated to reason, wisdom, self-knowledge, and spiritual exercise. Some church fathers understood themselves explicitly as "philosophers", however, within the new horizon of their faith, seeing Christ as "truth" incarnate (cf. John 14,6); their 'philosophy' was therefore ultimate, perfect or "true philosophy", a term used by Justin Martyr, Clemens of Alexandria, Augustine and others to characterize Christianity.¹

1. 1 Stoic Ecumenism: exemplarity and limits

1.1.1. The idea of ecumenism has its roots in Ancient Philosophy, as well. Long before "ecumenism" became so important for the churches of today, ecumenical thought had its foundations in the political philosophy of Antiquity.

For the intellectual elite of the big empires of ancient Greece and Rome (Alexandrine, Roman Empire), the *oikumene* – the entire, inhabited world – became, for the first time, a new intellectual framework for the idea of humanity which – in Stoic ethics – was developed towards the doctrine of a fundamental equality of all human beings. Here, "ecumenism" is a political and ethical idea: from a description of the (new) horizons of mere *contact* between (men,) peoples, nations, confessions, cultures, and religions, it acquires the meaning of a true *encounter*, determined by respect and tolerance.

Thus, Stoic philosophy is usually seen as the cradle of (western) 'ecumenical thought' – which was also related to the field of religion; as a result of the expeditions to new countries, Stoic philosophers could take a much wider perspective even with regard to religion: the variety of religions found in the newly conquered countries was, for them, a genuine proof of the existence of a divine being (and not a proof against the truth of a particular confession, as in contemporary relativism). The one God has no specific name, universally valid, among all peoples and times, but – according to the famous Stoic hymn to Zeus by Cleanthes – "many names"². This text is at the same time a philosophical and religious-liturgical testimony (it was written for the liturgical celebrations of the school community). Here, Zeus is praised as "the father of all mortals"; he is "almighty king" and at the same time "good" and "gracious and merciful father", who provokes "love". Cleanthes implores God's assistance, for he guarantees true "order" and "justice" and wants the "happiness" of "his people". This seems to be very close to Christian theology and the gospel of an unconditional, universal love of the father-God of Jesus, which is the foundation and reason for all

1 Cf. e.g. St. Augustine, *Contra Iulianum* 4,72. Quite recently, the Magisterium addressed the mutual relationship between philosophy and theology (not only did philosophy influence theology but the Christian adoption of philosophy changed it as well) in Pope John Paul II's encyclical "Faith and Reason" (1998); its fourth chapter, in particular, is dedicated to the history of the relationship (including the idea of "true philosophy"). [Editors note: the author's claim here would apply in particular to the developments in the Western mode of Christianity.]

2 H. V. Arnim (ed.), *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*. Leipzig, Berlin, 1923 (= SVF), vol. I, fragment p. 537.

Christian ecumenical efforts. First of all, however, Cleanthes' hymn confirms the 'physical' theology of the Stoics who conceive God as immanent in all (material) reality; a famous image for this is the idea that God went through reality "like honey through the honeycomb"³. So, "there is one God, in and through everything"⁴.

This strong idea of a presence of God in reality leads to pantheistic, panentheistic (or, better, 'theopenanistic'⁵) theologies and cosmologies: "the world is God"⁶, but also the (human) "spirit"⁷. For the Stoics, God is universal creator, "origin of everything"⁸, "father" not only of human beings but "of everything"⁹, he preserves the world¹⁰ and gives life¹¹. He is destiny and logos of the cosmos, reason of its teleology, more *telos* or end than cause or original principle of the world. In this, however, the Stoics are less concerned with the anticipating, future-oriented or 'projective' perspective of what *should* be, but with what is the case, with *factum* as *fatum*; the logos or reason of the world does not necessarily mean a potential 'rationalization' of the world, for instance through the rational human being, but it is simply the observation and affirmation of the factual as useful (end-fulfilling, purposeful) – as natural – as 'reasonable' (or 'logical', i.e. corresponding to the *logos*).

Now, in Stoic philosophy, political (and religious) ecumenism has a very remarkable cognitive reason. A lived humanity is achieved following the Greek path into the interior of a person: via self-knowledge and self-cure. This, however, doesn't mean an individual immersion into the depths of a soul which is understood in a modern sense, according to a labyrinthine pattern of secret chambers and dead ends, which needs the guidance of professional psychoanalysis in order to find itself. For the Greeks, self-knowledge and knowledge of human nature, world and self-knowledge coincide. For them, the individual is a microcosmic image of the macro-cosmos "being", and being is delimitation of the inner world of the ego; everywhere in the world (in being or reality), the self finds what is familiar to it from its own being.

With regard to wo/man, this means concretely: the person that seeks advice at the most famous of the more than sixty Greek oracles, the one at Delphi, when answered with the exhorting motto *gnothi seauton* ("Know thyself!"), is not primarily asked to

3 SVF I p. 155.

4 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* VII 9.

5 The term "panentheistic" modifies the idea of pantheism, where the propositions "all is God" and "God is all/ everything" may be considered to be identical. Such an understanding is not possible with the variant "God in everything". My construct "theopenanistic" is a term on its own for this idea; the opposite idea "everything in God", on the other hand, can even be shared by those who believe in a creator-god.

6 SVF II p. 528.

7 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* XII p. 26 and SVF I p. 102.

8 SVF I p. 153; cf. II p. 774.

9 SVF II p. 1021.

10 SVF I pp. 504, 530.

11 This is the meaning of the famous word *pneuma*, which is to be seen together with the ideas of a creative fire and spirit, cf. SVF II pp. 774, 1009, 1050s; I 102, 157.

come to knowledge of her individuality but of her humanity, her human being. Not psychology, but anthropology is meant here. For the Stoics – and not only for them, because later philosophical anthropologies mostly follow the idea of *animal rationale* –, the self understands itself as gifted with reason; at the same time, however, it comes to know that it is not alone with this: in their being human or human being, in their *humanitas* – which means: having reason – all humans, the entire humanity (*humanitas* in the second meaning of the word), are equal. The ethical-political consequence of this is that all human beings must also be equal, i.e. of equal value; they have equal dignity and rights and deserve equal respect.

Now, if God is spirit and present in the human being and especially in the human *logos*, the idea of the essential equality of all has also consequences for religious ecumenism as well as for the stoic proof of God in religious plurality. Seneca's word: "innate to everybody is the assumption of the existence of gods"¹² and Cicero's summary of the Stoic doctrine: "inherent to the human spirit is the idea that gods exist"¹³ are not only referring to the *conditio humana*, of which the idea of God is an essential aspect, but also to the *objective* reason of this (the human idea of God is knowledge of a *truly existing divine being*) – and also to the fundamental equality of all religions which are always directed towards the divine being from which all of them ultimately come.

1.1.2. However, this on principle equality of religions is soon relativized. According to Stoicism, there are different forms of religion. Panaitios distinguishes between "mythical, political and natural theology"¹⁴, and some Christian thinkers adopt this differentiation. Augustine, for instance, sees natural theology as the form of religion which is appropriate for thinkers¹⁵. This is an important turning point in Stoic thought: there is one way of religion and theology which is considered to be superior to others, which fulfils the *human* nature in the highest possible way. This, however, implies the inferiority of other religions. Here, the exemplarity of Stoic ecumenical thought can be questioned for a first time.

And it's even worse in politics and ethics. The universal equality noted by the Stoics was too wide to have been of political relevance. Even Stoic philosophers and statesmen influenced by Stoic thought were looking for closer correspondences and commonalities than the mind-being of all humans. They got involved in the all-too-human process of 'identification': groups de-fine their identity in a socio-political reality less by positively emphasizing what unifies everybody but rather by division, by negatively emphasizing what separates some from others (cf. the idea of a "common enemy"), i.e. by self-delimitations that can even, where it seems suitable, dismiss or negate the humanity of other peoples or classes, forgetting their *anima(l) rationale*. The

12 *Epistulae morales* 117, p. 6.

13 *De natura deorum* II p. 12.

14 Cf. K. Reinhardt, *Poseidonios*, München, 1921, p. 408.

15 He calls them "philosophers" (cf. above): *De civitate Dei* VI p. 5. NB: In the modern epoch, even *philosophers* developed systems of "natural theology", often based on Stoic ideas.

problem here is not to recognize human beings as worthy of respect, but to recognize all others as human beings which deserve such respect. Particularly in the eclectic philosophy of Rome (e.g. Cicero), which was strongly influenced by Stoic thought, the 'human' (*humanitas*) became the exclusive educatory ideal of an elite or 'intelligentsia' in which, often, the fact of belonging to a certain social class, the mere amount of some standardized knowledge and a humanistic ideal that was purely external became more important than intelligence, critical self-knowledge and humanity¹⁶.

Therefore, the Stoic idea that the common faculty of reason is the principle of human dignity, the idea of one and equal humanity, is limited in its 'ecumenical' exemplarity – for it goes together with two lines of thought which are proper to many Greek philosophies:

Firstly, it was connected with an ideal of maximal or 'superlative' being which easily turned into a reality of supremacy. The idea of having reason was connected with the postulate of highest development of reason. This, in itself, is nothing bad. However, the, on principle, honest anthropological and humanistic endeavor of such 'maximal ethics' had to become elitist and exclusivist (instead of humane) and led to a Stoic 'lead culture' which brought back the old distinction between Greeks and "barbarians": not anymore based on a purely ethnological foundation, but in a new form, according to a particular ideal of "moral goodness" as "characteristic of the Greek being"¹⁷. Thus, others had first to prove to be worthy of their innate 'human dignity' (of having reason) by given standards of a specific way of developing – and living – this dignity (reason).

Secondly, the Stoics subordinated their idea of the rational human being to a scruple of imperfection. For many Greek epistemologies, knowledge is basically knowledge of deficiency. For Plato, for instance, knowledge is attained via the divine ideas which, in their perfection, are not only the source of being of earthly things but also the source of our knowledge of these things – in *anamnesis*, the reminiscence of the soul's preexistent vision of the ideas. This means: an earthly being is known in its difference from or deficiency as against the divine original. Similarly, the existential self-knowledge of the Stoics is constantly faced with a moral not-anymore and not-yet. This is manifest in the doctrine of the *daimonion* which is the proper self, some kind of the individual's 'double', but the original, ideal, authentic and morally and humanly perfect 'double' or personality¹⁸. A gradual identification with it is an ethical duty in Stoic thought, just

16 And the seemingly integrative aspects of early Roman politics were no early form of ecumenism either, full of tolerance towards other peoples and cultures and mutual respect; they were nothing but a strategic form of 'power politics'. – For a more detailed critique of Roman Stoicism cf. C. Göbel, *Griechische Selbsterkenntnis. Platon, Parmenides, Stoa und Aristipp*, Stuttgart, 2002, pp. 221-234.

17 Strabo I pp. 4, 9 (quoting from Eratosthenes). For the idea of a Stoic "lead culture" cf. Göbel 2002, 227ss. Another issue is the missing awareness of other questions of 'humanity', e.g. *the humanitas* of women and slaves.

18 Cf. G. Misch, *Geschichte der Autobiographie I*, Leipzig, 1907, p. 35.

as the platonic philosopher, according to *Phaedo* 61d, aims at an existence that "dies" to the world by identifying himself with the original part of his being, i.e. the preexistent and immortal rational soul. In both cases, the human person knows herself as gifted with reason, but at the same time, she knows herself in her difference from the ideal. Even more, the educated Greek or Roman knows *others* as different from his ideal of man.

Here, the negative element in Greek self-knowledge gets a second dimension: the fallibility, nothingness and limitation of the individual are emphasized, e.g. the existential limitation and contingency which is manifest, most of all, in death, but also the cognitive limitedness of the human capacity of knowing the truth (Socrates was indefatigable in demonstrating this). Now, even the (on principle) limitless greatness of the being that possesses logos is seen as mere potentiality; and this potential is, for many Stoics, no reason for optimistic confidence in the future (development of one's potential: the human 'can'), but it is seen as a burden and disillusioning description of the now-and-here (the human 'must' or 'should...be better').

1.2 Religion and Morality

1.2.1. This form of self-knowledge is continued in Christianity, especially under the influence of Neo-Platonic and Stoic thought. The two directions of interpreting the *gnothi seauton* are now transformed: from anthropology to theology. In this context, the fathers reinterpret passages of the Old Testament as original images of the Greek idea of philosophical self-knowledge: the greatness of the human being points to the creator, whose *imago wo/man* is according to Gen 1,26. An 'exponentiation' of human properties towards the *ens perfectissimum* is therefore a means of drawing conclusions about the being of God. The other direction is that of negative theology or theology of opposites: from the nothingness that humans recognize in their being, they can sense the greatness of God, the totally different being: "Only those who have recognized themselves as nothings can recognize God"¹⁹.

Still, self-knowledge maintains its existential meaning. In his nothingness, his helplessness, man is dependent on the almighty God. And even in Christianity, God's grace is frequently understood as a "favor" – for those who "do" something for it (the English word "grace" has preserved the double meaning of "grace" and "favor", cf. *gratia*). Mortality is no problem for Christian self-knowledge anymore – death was conquered by Christ – but the participation in the eternal beatitude of immortality now becomes an earthly-moral problem. Self-knowledge as recognition of limitedness, mortality and dependency is transformed into a moral appeal to live this life in such a way that it becomes worthy of an afterlife. A 'meta-physical' (Last) Judgment is seen

¹⁹ Philo of Alexandria, *De somniis* I 60 (speaking about Abraham). Similar ideas can be found in many Christian authors. NB: There is no doubt that *negative* theology is of great, philosophical and critical, value. Still, Christianity is based upon something truly *positive*: the revelation in Jesus Christ, his guarantee of God's true being, the Gospel of unconditional love.

as the reason and foundation of earthly morality; morality is bound to religion (cf. *religio*). This is, of course, based upon the belief in a life after death; but death and God get a moral function: they are gateway to the Last Judgment (death) and judge of the individual's morality (God). For St. Ambrose, self-knowledge – which he finds expressed in Song of Songs 1,8 – is related to knowledge of mortality, and that means: to knowledge or recognition of the sinfulness of man. Thus, self-knowledge leads to humility and asks for *conversion* as a prime requirement for salvation from eternal damnation²⁰.

This idea is not genuinely Christian; we find it among the Greeks as well; this leads back to the philosophical schools of the Hellenistic era. Existential self-knowledge is the recognition of the limitedness of man, which is concrete in mortality, but it also includes the anthropological-ontological recognition of the immortal and rational *part* of man's being. In Greek philosophy, this led to attempts at self-immersion into the rational self (soul) through spiritual exercises which often resulted in a strictly ascetic way of life, especially in the Stoic school (even though the word *askein/askesis* originally meant nothing but "practice" in a very general sense). The self-immersion into the rational soul – where it was existentially motivated and more than a 'simple' act of remembering the rational power of the human person – can be regarded as a spiritual exercise itself; it has been called "learning to die" (by P. Hadot with reference to Plato, Cicero, and others²¹): the philosopher reduced his existence on earth to that part of his that would continue to live after death and tried to avoid any form of attachment to all external things which once would have to be left with sorrow; ultimately, the Greeks tried to prepare for death by regularly anticipating one's last moment to come in constant practice²². Such contemplation, practice and concentration on reason as the immortal part of one's own being could certainly help to prepare the disciple for the hour of his death and reduce its sorrow; but it also meant to subordinate the entire earthly existence to its end, dedicating one's life completely to dealing with its end.

Such a way of life became an existential desideratum and could also become a moral postulate. Plato's doctrine of afterlife and transmigration of souls, for example, had a moral, exhorting meaning²³. His ideal of a life dedicated to reason, as described e.g. in the *Phaedo*, within an existential horizon (the death of Socrates), is a precondition for a good existence in the afterlife which is granted according to one's morality on earth, in this life. Even Epicurus can be seen as a 'witness' to this way of thinking, for he tried

20 *Expositio Psalmi CXVIII* 2, p. 13. (However, the idea of the greatness of man as *imago dei* can also be found in Ambrose's writings, e.g. in the *Hexameron*).

21 Cf. P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris, p. 1987.

22 A similar exercise has been practiced in Christian monasteries and seminaries for centuries: the meditation on the death of Christ and on mortality (often done on Friday afternoon, at the hour of Christ's death). Moreover, many forms of spiritual exercise that have been practiced in the Church (in Monasticism, St. Ignatius, etc.) are modeled on the practical dimension of Greek philosophy.

23 Diogenes Laertius (= DL) III p. 80; cf. Plutarch, *De genio Socratis*.

to demonstrate the non-existence of an afterlife and the *mortality* of the soul with the explicit motivation of taking this moral burden from his disciples²⁴.

The logically 'strange' idea that eternity could depend on moral deeds, infinity on the finite, is a lasting *topos* in the history of philosophy and theology, even in modern moral philosophies. I. Kant postulates the immortality of the soul and existence of God, which he cannot prove theoretically, because of considerations about an unjust distribution of goods on earth (i.e. not according to morality)²⁵, and this reflects similar ideas of Augustine about a post-mortal system of justice in *De Civitate Dei* XX 2 and I 9. Thus, God becomes a moral god (in spite of the autonomy of the moral law²⁶), religion a question of "moral views"²⁷. This doesn't solve the problem of theodicy, but moral evil is referred to a human freedom whose sanctioning instance is a judgment in the afterlife. Man can, must and may, at the same time full of hope and of fear, wait for the divine kingdom and judgment to come which will sanction all deeds – in the double sense of the word "sanction": either punish or confirm, and thus eternalize (and sanctify) human morality, providing in this way 'poetic justice'²⁸. The necessary condition for this is death.

1.2.2. In ethical contexts, the word "meaning" usually means something like "purpose" or "goal". Meaningful life is defined by having goals and objectives. Another word for this is "end"; and the double meaning of the word "end" tells us something revealing about the relationship between religion and morality which is manifest in the moral perspective on death: here, "meaning of life" is defined in an 'end-perspective', judged from, at or even after the end of life. This is highly problematic. Death is the chronological end, but not the end or purpose or, as such, the fulfillment or completion of life. Still, death, or better the last moments of one's existence, can be seen as the ultimate test of the meaning of one's existence, looking back on what one has done in one's life. In some religious doctrines of morality, however, death is seen as a gateway to the Last Judgment, an after-death examination into one's form of life, whose results determine the future existence of the individual soul: heaven for some, hell for the others, according to one's moral performance on earth. In most cases, such a form of faith comes with the idea of an exclusivity of the heavenly existence, of salvation and sanctification: reserved for baptized Christians only, for a particular confession or for

24 Cf. DL X p. 124.

25 Cf. *Critique of Practical Reason* (= KpV), A pp. 203, 220, 224 (Kant's doctrine of "summum bonum" of which ultimate happiness is a necessary art which, however, is not attainable on earth). It should be noted that this part of the relationship between morality and religion in Kant can be seen as 'functional' in a context of philosophical theology – reflections upon the nature and meaning of morality lead to the assumption of a divine being (not only as giver of a preexistent, natural moral law but as judge of man's morality) – whereas for many ordinary believers the relationship starts with the assumption of God who is seen as giving certain moral commands how to live one's life (and who might then, again, judge one's morality, i.e. in how far people succeeded in living according to his laws).

26 Cf. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (= RGV), A p. 123 etc.

27 RGV, A p. 146.

28 But cf. also KpV, A p. 233 for a better understanding of the moral duties as "divine precepts" in Kant.

those who led a life according to the morals of their Church. This, however, is neither philosophically 'logical' nor according to a correct understanding of the gospel of love of Jesus Christ.

First of all, meaning and purpose of human life and a moral existence do not come from its end, but from its beginning, or, metaphysically speaking, from its inner potency, from human being and its possibilities as such (this is what man becomes aware of in Greek self-knowledge). In ethics, we should not be looking – using Aristotelian terms – for a *final cause* of morality but for an efficient or formal cause of it; not “what for?” in the sense of: “what good does it for me?” is the right question of morality, but “what from?”: “how is it that I have in myself the potency of being good?”, which is a potency that tends towards its realization. This anthropological foundation is the origin of human – and of Christian – ethics. This will become clearer in the course of Part Two.

Christians, in particular, have to ask: is a scrupulous morality of a constant 'not-yet' really compatible with the cheerful gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, who preached a bird-like worry-freeness (cf. Luke 12, 24)? Does the father-God of Jesus want a pagan *do ut des*, a bargain for moral perfection and exclusive guarantee on salvation? Does he want the exclusion of entire peoples and cultures? Or, more generally speaking, is it possible that the creator-god who, at the beginning of everything, brought the world into being – from the perfection of being that he himself is – wants a scruple of deficiency among his beings, an existential uncertainty among his creatures about their eschatological destiny: either returning home or turning away and being turned away? Can – or how can – theology be a foundation of morals? Shouldn't the Christian religion think of God's justice in a completely different way? No doubt about it.

And a first hint at this is the motif of self-knowledge itself, and the form that it takes in the *New Testament*. There is only one direct linguistic reference to the *gnothi seauton*, i.e. 2 Cor 13, 5. And here, it is not knowledge of one's nothingness; but the result of self-knowledge fits harmoniously into the liberating message of Jesus who wants us to have confidence in God and in ourselves: his *abba* is, of that we can be certain, our *abba* as well²⁹, him, we recognize in ourselves: that is the result of self-knowledge according to St. Paul: “Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?” (2 Cor 13, 5).

Before we can continue with more detailed reflections on Christian theology in Part II, another form of Greek philosophy, of understanding self-knowledge and of thinking death and morality together, can be an example of the direction such reflections will take. Stoic ethics is certainly aiming at a maximum of humanity, but failing in the concrete historic reality; an alternative to this is the 'minimal' ethics of Aristippus of

29 This idea is related to the motif of self-knowledge and, thus, to knowledge of the kingdom of God *within the human being* in the apocryphal gospel of Thomas (Log. 3). A similar idea, with reference to Luke 17:21f., can be found in Kant (RGV, A p. 195): self-knowledge is a rational faculty, the capacity of practical reason, i.e. morality, which is *realized* in the “kingdom of God” which is a “moral” kingdom and, therefore, recognizable by human reason. Kant's conclusion is that man should have confidence in himself, in the rational and 'godlike' capacities he possesses (cf. RGV, A p. 268). This gives him *dignity*.

Cyrene whose philosophy is also inspired by the central idea of self-knowledge and who shows an 'ecumenical open-mindedness'.

1.3. 'Ecumenical' Elements in Aristippus

The ethics of Aristippus, which I have reconstructed in different publications³⁰, can be characterized as a "let-be" and true tolerance of different ways of life that are accepted as equally valid; he lives true humanity – the word *anthropismos* is first used in a description of Aristippus³¹. Aristippus (435-355 BC), a disciple of Socrates, founder of one of the so-called "minor" Socratic schools, the Cyrenaic School, has often been misunderstood as a superficial hedonist, but once rehabilitated as a serious philosopher, he is indeed very close to a really ecumenical stance and to the specific Christian ethics with its postulate of humanity, a humanity the Christian God has 'become himself', in his *logos* incarnate, the "son of man" who is both, divine and most human humanity. There are several parallels between Aristippus and our preceding reflections.

Among the testimonies about Aristippus' philosophy, words and doctrines attributed to him, there is one passage of existential reflection about the question of death and immortality, which can also be read as a testimony to a gospel-like unconcern. It is founded in the ethos of the Cyrenaic philosopher. A closer look can offer the outline of a new, 'ecumenical' foundation of morality which is distinctly different from the one sketched out before and leads towards a path that Christians should also follow, according to the gospel of Jesus, after having corrected the misunderstanding of a threatening moral God.

The humanity of Aristippus – verified in many anecdotes about his life that describe the humane relations he had with people from all social classes, even with slaves³² – is proof of a conviction of an equal validity of all forms of life which is even reflected existentially, i.e. with regard to the limitedness of human existence, to death and immortality. Aristippus is reported to have said: "*The way to Hades is one and the same everywhere*"³³. There are some difficulties in interpreting this word but I've tried to demonstrate its authenticity with both, philological and philosophical or 'topical' means; because, once Aristippus' philosophy has been understood properly, the idea fits very well into the overall picture. What, then, does the word stand for?

It shows that Aristippus is conscious of the limitedness of his own being; and knowing that death will ultimately affect everybody without distinction there is no

30 In particular in Göbel 2002, pp. 238-298.

31 DL II p. 70. For details cf. Göbel 2002, p. 246.

32 Cf. e.g. DL II pp. 67, 77. Some more details are also given in my paper on "Aristippus and the Ethical Relevance of Megarian Thought".

33 Stobaeus pp. 40, 48. For details regarding the tradition, sources and authenticity of this word cf. my article "*Antike Selbsterkenntnis und ökumenische Philosophie. Auf dem Weg zum christlichen Übermenschen*", in C. Göbel, *Antike und Gegenwart. Griechische Anmerkungen zu ethischen Fragen unserer Tage*, Hildesheim, New York/, Zürich, 2007, 195-248.

sense in preferring one way of life to another. In a tradition typical of the philosophical schools after Socrates, and in no way inferior to the Cynics and Stoics, the standard for considering different forms of life as equally valid is a fundamental indifference towards life and the earthly things, which is based upon the recognition of the limitedness of human life³⁴.

The development of spiritual exercises such as “learning to die”, pivotal for the practical-ascetical dimension of Hellenistic philosophy where self-knowledge became a form of life or *ars vitae* (“art of living”), was a direct consequence of the knowledge of the conditionality of being. They were meant to deal with the existential problem of death; and – as we’ve already seen – people were exhorted to live a particular, allegedly more ‘essential’ form of life (especially in the Stoic school) in which – by consciously renouncing worldly goods and through practical asceticism – they were to liberate themselves from the things of the world.

Aristippus doesn’t draw such conclusions from the philosophical recognition of the limitedness of being. His reasons for that become obvious from the quoted passage from Stobaeus 40, 8. It is the only hint at an existential reflection in his thought, but at the same time the decisive standard for the equality of all forms of life: equally worthy (or valid) is *‘what lives’*.

A result of this idea is the rejection of any judgment about someone else. For, the other’s self could only be judged from the outside; and here, according to Aristippus, we cannot but make the simple observation that the way in which we see the other living is already his self that we have to tolerate as such. In observing the other, there is no distinction between authentic and inauthentic; the other is always and on principle accepted and respected as authentic. This is the foundation of the tolerance of Aristippus. Nothing is more certain for him than the fact that “everybody is what they can be, and on all the conditions on which they are, they couldn’t have been different”³⁵.

Now, the attitude of measuring all forms of life only according to the simple and most universal – but existential and human – standard that they *fill life* and that they are equally limited by *death* can be based upon different considerations:

1.3.1. Upon a belief in the end of all being with death, i.e. upon the idea of the annihilating power of death. If being is absurd, all forms of life are equal, indifferent, the same (because they don’t really matter). Here, ethical equality in an existential horizon is based on *absurdity*. Possible practical consequences of the idea of metaphysical

34 Death as an ‘equalizer’ of all (social) differences that exist during lifetime is an old *topos*. It can even be found in Stoic thought, e.g. in Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* VI p. 24 (though, here, it did not lead to an equitable social acceptance of different people).

35 O. Engel, C.M. Wieland: *Aristipp und einige seiner Zeitgenossen*“, in W. Jens (ed.), *Kindlers Neues Literaturlexikon*, Vol. 17, München, 1992, p. 638. Aristippus’ idea that another person cannot be judged from the outside mirrors the scholastic idea of the autonomy of the conscience.

meaninglessness are: (I.) immediate suicide³⁶ or (II.) a desperate craving for living, trying to have the most possible pleasure in the short time that is at one's disposal (this is the way of popular hedonism for which the motto *carpe diem* is nothing but a restless seeking for pleasure³⁷). Another, all-too-human possibility – but rarely considered philosophically – is (III.) to simply continue to live one's life, pleasant and sluggish, from day to day, until the end of one's days. A change of life – or conscious acceptance of a meaningless existence – is not necessarily a consequence, even if, basically, one recognizes absurdity. And that would be the (IV.) possibility: the recognition of metaphysical meaninglessness, of death as an end without completion, is turned into a moral admonition: to accept one's existence "heroically", without another life-to-come, without God, without a divine reward for earthly morality, imposing the moral law on oneself. This is the postulate of ethical self-obligation which we find in Nietzsche or in 20th century existentialism: the postulate of giving meaning to a metaphysically meaningless life-time³⁸.

1.3.2. However, the idea of equality is also possible because of an entirely different consideration: because of the belief in *immortality*. But this doesn't necessarily lead to the assumption of a *moral* god and of the dependency of the afterlife on the moral performance in this world. Such an idea of interdependency would actually *eternalize differences* between human persons and their forms of life, based on the assumption of a moral bargain and barter between God and man, on the idea of exclusive redemption for some in the world-to-come.

In fact, the radical absurdity of being that has become a central idea in contemporary existentialism (e.g. in A. Camus), is rather alien to Greek thought. Even Hades, which Aristippus refers to in Stobaeus 40, 8, the world of the dead, is still a place of 'being', if only a world of shadows. But the mythical idea of Hades can in itself be understood as a pre-philosophical expression of the belief in immortality, in so far as it doesn't put an absolute end to existence, but implies a continued form of 'being'. Thus, Aristippus' reference to the myth of Hades expresses a confidence that, ultimately, could hint at a belief in immortality³⁹.

36 This, however, is a conclusion rarely drawn in the history of philosophy. Interestingly enough, there is a Cyrenaic philosopher, Hegesias, who recommended suicide as a way out of a senseless world (DL II p. 86) – without, however, considering this option as a solution for himself; and it seems that a royal ban was enough to stop his pessimistic teaching (cf. Cicero, *Tuscolanae disputationes* I 83).

37 This is what the word "Epicureanism" usually means in our common language today (whereas the historical figure *Epicurus* was a true philosopher as well, trying to find a way of life that would give him – and his disciples – tranquility of the soul). Some scholars see Hegesias as representative of such a constant desire for pleasure (while the fact that his form of hedonism soon became pessimism is seen as a proof of its untenability; cf. J. Hirschberger, *Geschichte der Philosophie*. Vol. 1. Freiburg, 1964, 71). Aristippus himself, however, shows the tranquil concentration on the present instant which is so characteristic of all Hellenistic schools, he enjoys the present (and the good it offers) without anxiously seeking pleasures in a 'dark' future (cf. DL II 90) and never gives in to the idea that he could 'miss something'.

38 Cf. Part II.

39 Still, Hades is not a desirable place to live; for more details on Hades and on the Greek notions of absurdity or meaninglessness and of death and afterlife, cf. Göbel 2002, 131ss. and pp. 152-161.

Only, the consequences for the moral judgment about forms of human life, i.e. the conclusion that Aristippus draws from his belief in immortality, are totally different – but actually more consistent – from the conclusions drawn in other philosophical schools and in many religious systems of morals: for, not only in view of death, but also in view of an immortality which is *secure anyway*, it doesn't matter how the individual lives his life. If immortality is a fact (is true), then it is equally valid for everybody. Therefore, Aristippus doesn't exhort others to find a more essential or 'authentic' way of life. For, we are not only unable to judge, from the 'outside', whether the life of the other is meaningful or miserable, if he has found or missed or lost himself, if he should change his life or not – but it is also, in a 'metaphysical' (and even 'eschatological') sense, *indifferent*. This indifference, which results from a certainty about a secure immortality, is the ultimate reason for the equality that Aristippus concedes to all forms of life and to all individuals. This ultimate security is, at the same time, the reason why Aristippus knows to enjoy each moment of his own life and recommends (and shows himself) an unconcern with regard to one's future and end of life which is rarely found in any great thinker.

It is certainly true that the idea of death as an 'equalizer' is an old *topos*; it is, however, rarely seen that, as such, it only has a meaning with regard to earthly existences (which, by death, are equally brought to an end) and that it is independent of a belief or non-belief in a life after death. Where people believe in an afterlife, death can become a dis-equalizer and exclusive business (to the same extent to which it brings an equal end to all earthly existences), *if* the eschatological after-death-perspective is combined with a moral perspective. Aristippus stands out against this, with his worry-free perspective and idea of equal validity.

So, the standard or horizon of the assessment of equality in Aristippus is even wider than the Stoic idea of reason as human nature: it is pure life, the pure being-existent of the other; but this standard is *applied* with existential care and true humanity; it is not abandoned for some elitism, in certain historic circumstances; it is, for him, absolutely valid; that makes the difference. Thus, pure tolerance is possible, which in Aristippus becomes an ethical principle and from which he can, in a truly 'ecumenical' way, treat everybody with the same humanity, because he refrains from judging them. On the way towards lived tolerance we do not necessarily need the depth of the Stoic knowledge of self = all ("I am like everybody"); sometimes the 'superficial' insight of Aristippus might be enough, that I am but one being among many others. And again, self-knowledge, individual ethics leads to social ethics and even politics; for: this stance – transferred to the social, political and global encounter of peoples, cultures, civilizations, and religions – could also be exemplary in today's attempts at finding and founding a common ground of dialogue, respect, tolerance, peace, and unity among diverse cultures and traditions, a truly "universal ethos", because Aristippus simply accepts others in their very being, convinced of a fundamental equality of all and promoting a philosophy that is rooted in true humanity which all humankind deserve

insofar human. He takes a philosophical stance of unconditional openness towards the other (be it another individual or another culture). Thus, he can see equality and (in) diversity.

II

The Ecumenical Logic of the Christian Faith and 'Ecumenical Philosophy'

2.1. The God of Unconditional Love

The significant newness of the gospel of Jesus is its different image of God. Despite initial criticism even the Greeks, in whose culture the elementary philosophical roots of Christianity lie, still had a theology of the fear-making and jealous gods, which were mollified with 'liturgy' and sacrifices and whose favour could only be obtained by bargaining. The errors in religious things, which e.g. Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro* deals with, are not removed by the refutation of Socrates. Socrates actually had to pay with his life for calling into question the religious system of his fatherland. And even though the ideas of religious enlightenment could no longer be arrested – it wasn't possible to prevent the fact that very similar errors were made in the history of Christianity as well. Self-complacency, fundamentalism and a misunderstanding of symbolic language, close connections between state and religion, superficiality, the idea of bartering with God, the idea that human deeds could have an effect on God, that a moral performance on earth could have a salvific effect – all of this, unfortunately, is not foreign to Christianity either. The worst misunderstanding of the Christian God is this moral understanding of religion which is a falling back behind Jesus' image of God, back to a pagan *do ut des*. It is against any theo-logic, against any coherent speaking about God (be it philosophical or biblical). This way of interpreting man's relationship with God had a certain renaissance in medieval thought, but it had always been present: before, even in Scripture (cf. e.g. Jer 17, 10: "God judges according to merits"), and after, e.g. in Kant's philosophical adaptation of the Christian doctrine (ultimate happiness as a reward for morality). Together with the Jewish idea of collective guilt and vicarious expiation, it led to certain medieval satisfaction-theories of the Atonement, most prominent in Anselm of Canterbury and his idea of Jesus' expiatory sacrifice.

Even though Anselm saw that thinking about God caused ontological problems and even though he repeatedly emphasized the uniqueness and particularity of the divine being (which he called, in his works *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, the "greatest being", the "greatest conceivable being", the being "greater than which nothing can be conceived" or a being "greater than what can be conceived") – Anselm still did not see that he himself remained within all-too-human categories when he spoke about God and his salvation and justice: he saw that God's justice had to be thought in correspondence to his being, according to the idea of unsurpassable greatness – and yet he envisioned God involved in a *human* justice of "give and get"; the satisfaction-theory developed in his book *Cur Deus Homo* only suggests a *formal superlative of the*

human idea of penal justice in order to call it 'divine' and 'greatest' justice. The reason for Anselm's failure is not his inability to look beyond a specific medieval system of penal law (as is frequently said) but his more general inability to transcend an all-too-human understanding of justice, almighty power and goodness as attributes of the Christian God, whereas, at the beginning of Christianity, even St. Paul had explicitly distinguished between divine and earthly "justice" (cf. Romans 3,21-31; Galatians 3,6ff.).⁴⁰

The core of the Christian message, its true mystery or singularity is not to be found by archaeological, historical or philological research – but by a thematic reflection on the really unprecedented part of the gospel. It is an idea: the idea of a comprehensive and "unconditional love" of God. That is the radically new message that stands in the centre of the preaching of Jesus Christ and it is also the hermeneutical key to cleanse biblical, theological and liturgical texts from misunderstandings, inauthentic additions and moralistic ballast⁴¹. It is also the decisive difference from the Greek images of God, both in the religious tradition and in philosophy. For: a sacrificial mentality, a belief in performance and bartering, can only arise where God is misunderstood to be the ill-tempered, fear inducing being, with whom one has to make one's peace. But even the definition of God of the Greek philosophers is incomplete. For Socrates (as well as for Anselm, in his philosophical endeavours), a trade with the gods is not possible because these are perfect and 'totally different' ('ab-solute' being). Yet, this leads to a certain irrelevance of the divine. It is, at most, still the object of philosophical contemplation – as "highest truth", "unmoved mover" or, above all, as the "necessary being" which enables and causes the contingent world. The Christian faith, which connects the idea of a creator-god with the God of unconditional love, succeeds in 1.) offering a religious expression of the only concept of God that is philosophically acceptable (i.e. 'logical'⁴²

40 I am currently working on a 'reconstruction' of Anselm's thought; even though the 'logic of Christianity' he develops in *Cur Deus Homo* is incomplete, I will be trying to show that Anselm's theology (esp. in *Monologion* and *Proslogion*) can still be a starting point for the demonstration of a 'logic' of the Christian faith (and its claims - *philosophically* - to religious 'superiority'.)

41 Here, we can't go into detail; but it is certainly true that much care and attention is needed when confronting e.g. moralizing passages from the Bible that seem to contradict the *unconditionality* of God's love (while all theologians will agree that *love* is the central theological message of the gospel). Still, there are many ways, not only of declaring such passages unauthentic or post-Jesuan additions, but also of interpreting them (e.g. as hypothetical speech etc.) and thus incorporating them into the fullness of the gospel-message; for more details cf. e.g. the highly recommendable book by E. Biser, *Einweisung ins Christentum*, Düsseldorf, 1997.

42 It is another question whether God is *conceivable at all*. According to Augustine, a 'conceived God' would not be a god (*Sermon* 117:5). Still, he – and many scholastic theologians (e.g. Anselm; Thomas) – are convinced that we might not know the innermost being of God but at least some basic facts about his existence and relationship with the world. There are quite a few reasons why Christian theology can go beyond a purely negative theology, because it is, as already mentioned, a 'positive' religion in itself: based on a historical revelation, on Scripture, on the idea that God gave us not only faith but also reason in order to seek him and try to understand him better. Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas are great examples of such a *harmony of faith and reason* which constitutes Christian theology. Still, even though God's *ratio* (and the divine *ratio* and order of the world) might be understandable by human *ratio* and intellect (as a divine instrument) and is *not illogical*, some of his 'reasons' go beyond the logic and "wisdom of the world" (1 Cor 1:18ff.), e.g. his way of saving man and 'doing justice'. Anselm himself might have lost sight of this difference, sticking to an all-too-human logic of justice, merit, punishment and salvation.

): the God of unconditional being, who is 'translated' into religious language in the idea of the all-creator; and 2.) in finding its correspondence and fulfilment in a *personal being*, the loving father-God who frees wo/man for love. This is the logical singularity of Christianity – convincing both philosophically and biblically.

The fact that the unconditional love of the Christian God is directed at all people without exception, is not only obvious from Jesus' order to his disciples, to carry (out) the gospel in all the world and to all peoples (Mt 28,19; Mk 16,15), which – together with Paul's mission to the Gentiles – was the basis for the fact that Christianity did not remain the sect of a tribe, but could become a global religion. Rather, the essence of this anti-exclusive "*cat-holicism*" of the Christian faith already lies in the central belief in a creator-god. That becomes obvious from a brief look at the paradise tale of Genesis. Nobody today will hold on verbatim to the tempting and jealous God, who throws Adam and Eve out of paradise in Gen 3,1-24 and curses his creation. If the Fall of Man really threw mankind back to mortality, then God would not be God, neither omnipotence *nor* love. That means that death and evil must have been there from the beginning, the Fall of Man is the symbolic expression of a determination of the human being. Or: we are – ontologically – still in the same condition as at the 'time' of the creation of the world. The issue here is that, for Christians, there is no original state of paradise that was lost and could be reobtained by acts of atonement or by following some laws and regulations which serve as means of pacification of the angry God. Rather, where there is nothing that would have to be regained, not only ('earthly') death and evil are given facts of the human condition from the beginning, but at the same time, redemption and salvation must also have been a fact right from the beginning. It is true that evil is in the world, but never for or against a God, who can only be understood as "beyond good and evil" (Nietzsche).

There cannot be remoteness from God, if He is a true, all-embracing *God*; God is not infinitely "far from us", as Anselm says in *Proslogion* 16, because it is *He* who chooses to be close, to be our father and brother, who is even recognizable in human *self-knowledge* (cf. above, 2 Cor 13,5). The totally different (Anselm says: "greater") being of God is not necessarily incomprehensible and beyond reach, 'ab-solute' in the sense of an ontological impossibility of any relationship; but, here, insurmountable greatness and presence (and even human smallness), far and near (and even 'immanent') fall together, in creating love. There is a relationship with God '*before*' all the ontological problems Anselm tries to solve (i.e. the question of how a finite being can have a salvific, eschatological relationship – and any kind of relation – with an infinite being⁴³). It is a relationship initiated by the infinite being, God, Himself; it is the '*relationship*' of creating the finite from nothingness. Before the "anthropological turn" of modern theology there had already been God's very own 'anthropological turn' – when he decided to 'turn towards' human beings, by creating them, and by

43 According to G. Gäde, *Eine andere Barmherzigkeit. Zum Verständnis der Erlösungslehre Anselms von Canterbury*, Würzburg, 1989, Anselm's main goal in writing *Cur Deus Homo* was to solve this ontological problem.

becoming human Himself. In this 'ontological transcendental' (as we could call it), all apparent ontological problems are solved *a priori*. But this also means that the salvation of all men must be given – in a general, ontological sense – already in the mere act of creation. Indeed, if the Christian gospel of the *unconditional* love is *truth*, then it can only be truth for all⁴⁴. Therefore, according to the Prologue of John (1,1ss) and St. Paul's letters (e.g. Eph 1,3ss., Col 1,12ss.), Christ was before the world, before Adam; salvation *before* the Fall of Man; the world was created in and through Christ, as said in the Creed: "through him all things were made". He is the *logos*, and his *logos* (word/teaching) is the saving promise of the unconditional love of the creating father.

Again: while the idea of a creator-god is the religious form of the philosophical concept of God as "necessary being", on the level of a personal God and the eschatological relationship with his creature, no other idea of God can 'logically' correspond to this but the (Christian) idea of the all-loving God, whom Jesus promised us again, after his original covenant of love – i.e. creation – had become manifest in the "first covenant" with Israel. The Church is called – following Jesus' words, teachings and examples – to carry out the "new covenant", bringing the "joyful" and *liberating* message (*euangelion*) to the entire world and proclaiming the unconditional salvation of all mankind. Only an unconditional love of God corresponds to the unconditional being which is the philosophical definition of God.⁴⁵

Even the attribute of almighty power, in God, does not contradict unconditional love; the otherness of God applies to the notion of power as well. God's omnipotence is manifest, for example, in the popular idea that God is all-seeing: "*deitas est quae omnia videt*" is the Scholastic formula⁴⁶. This, for centuries, induced the fear of the faithful; even Nietzsche's Zarathustra couldn't stand the thought and, consequently, "murdered" this all-seeing, prying and oppressive God⁴⁷. The Christian God, however, does not look at us with scorn and anger, merciless, but with love. Just as his "*justice*" makes us just ("justi-fies") – so does his "*almightiness*" make everything out of love. The "unity of omnipotence and love" is a popular definition of God among modern Christian theologians, and it is a good one – but this unity is not a *paradox*, as many theologians hold; God's *love* is his power, with his love's power he acts. The Christian God is (the only God) free from any ambiguity.

44 This is a special form of the universality of truth, of the universal character of any kind of truth.

45 In the present attempt at showing a philosophical logic of the Christian faith, the unconditionality of God's love might be seen as a requirement of *philosophical theo-logy* but it is also supported by exegetical evidence. Thus, a philosophical expectation (towards religions) is met by the Christian faith – if unconditional love truly is recognized as the core of the gospel; thus, philosophical theology could even be the inspiration for applying this 'hermeneutical key' to the Bible in order to then 'cleanse' it; this specific philosophical perspective, however, is not needed to identify the core message of the gospel; still, a philosopher can look at the Bible through the eyes of pure reason and simply note some fundamental coincidences.

46 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I 13, p. 8.

47 F. Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, in: *Kritische Studienausgabe* (= KSA). Vol 4. München/Berlin, 1980, p. 328. Nietzsche, however, felt that God's mercy, not his mercilessness, was oppressive; for more details cf. my essay "Nietzsches Übermensch – Fluchtübung des ängstlichen Adlers?", in: *Antonianum* 76 (2002), pp. 495-519.

The unconditional, unretractable, already achieved, redemption of all mankind is a message which represents a scandal for all groups which, over centuries, meant to be in the possession of the guarantee of an exclusive claim to salvation, a stance that led to a feeling of superiority and to a moral, religious and often political exclusivism and thus *hindered* the realization of true humanity and ecumenism.

2.2. The 'Christian Overman'

After a correction of (Christian) misconceptions of God and justice it is clear that piety has nothing to do with superficial forms, it has nothing to do with renunciation as such and nothing with a human idea of justice, as religion is not a barter, salvation cannot be earned. For centuries, many Christians have equated a salvation-earning "work in the vineyards of the Lord" (cf. Mt 20,1-16 – this text is one of Jesus' central parables of unconditional love) with religious zeal, morals and earthly denial – based on a total misconception of 'their' God; for, in eschatological terms, such acts achieve nothing or at least *nothing more* than other forms of life, as redemption and salvation can only always be given to all men in God's unconditional love and grace. At the same time, of course, the value of moral efforts remains beyond questioning. It would only be misguided to justify it religiously as the *condition* for deliverance. If God's love is *unconditional* – then nothing can be its condition. God is not an anthropomorphic, all-too-human, moral God.

The *idea of a 'moral God'* was criticized by Nietzsche when he proclaimed the "death of God"⁴⁸ and the Overman. However, with the rediscovery of the genuine Christian image of God and his unconditional, fatherly love, Nietzsche's criticism of the very limited idea of a moral God becomes superfluous. God is no longer a hindrance to ethics and humanity but indeed reason, example and guarantee of this true core of the gospel. Yet, even *with* a God, Nietzsche's suggestions are worth thinking about:

For Christians, a stance now appears to be necessary which could be described as a *Christian Overman*⁴⁹ – if the "Overman" is, according to Nietzsche's definition, he who endures the fact that there are no rewarding or punishing gods anymore demanding ethical action out of fear for one's own destiny in an afterlife; the Overman is he who endures the fact that, above all, man must obligate himself to live ethically; Nietzsche asks: "Are you able to be the judge of your own deeds?"⁵⁰. But this is something that

48 Cf. The Gay Science = KSA 3, p. 574.

49 My adaptation aims at making Nietzsche's particular idea and definition of the "Overman" fruitful for Christian thinking, taken out of Nietzsche's context and transferred to a special attitude that I consider to be characteristic of the Christian faith as such which is 'over-human' (in this specific sense) in itself. So, it doesn't simply mean that Christians should be over-men in the sense of being better or 'more human' persons – though this is also asked of them and should be a result of the "Christian Overman"-attitude; for more details cf. e.g. my essay "Antike Selbsterkenntnis und ökumenische Philosophie. Auf dem Weg zum christlichen Übermenschen", in: C. Göbel, *Antike und Gegenwart. Griechische Anmerkungen zu ethischen Fragen unserer Tage*, Hildesheim, New York/ Zürich, 2007, pp. 195-248.

50 *Thus spoke Zarathustra* = KSA 4, p. 81.

is not at all contrary to Christian ethics. A Christian, too, has to be such an Overman, understanding 1.) that ethical action or morality is first to be directed at the fellow man and not at God; that it must feed itself from other motivations than from an alleged 'reward' or guarantee of salvation – namely from an almost 'overhuman' ethical self-obligation and responsibility; and 2.) that not only those are rewarded with rescue and salvation who have worked their whole life in the "vineyard of the lord", but even those who have only spent an hour here (Mt 20,1-16).

Herewith pious zeal and moral action are – with regard to the hope of earning salvation – not only unnecessary, but almost superfluous. It is demanded of a Christian to do good *although* he is (and others are) already saved anyway. (This is where Aristippus' existential reflection comes very close to a Christian understanding).

And we must admit: the old, moral, demonic-human God was in reality always "dead" (Nietzsche), he never existed – only the God, who loves and thus frees us to humanity and love. Now, for a believing Christian, of course, such an 'overhuman endurance' of the 'superfluity' of one's own moral actions and good works is not a "heroic" act as it is for Nietzsche or for atheistic existentialists, it is *not* senseless, but it is founded in the love of the father-god and motivated by the example of his messenger and son, the god-man Jesus Christ and his humanity. It is not a *condition* for salvation and redemption, but a *result* of redemption (*redemption* is its transcendental condition); it is an opportunity to realize the true being of the world and of wo/man, i.e. of ourselves.

Looking for a new (religious) foundation of morality recurring – with reference to Aristotle and his modal and causal theories (cf. Part One) – to the human condition and its factual possibilities, we can say: morality is a *potential* or *potency* that human beings have, it is part of our nature; and in a religious horizon, believing in the creator-god, we can understand this potential as a divine gift or as the Spirit working in us⁵¹. Now, potentials want to be realized⁵²; a corresponding (ethical) way of life is therefore ultimately a fulfillment of our own, reasonable human being; it is 'common sense', it guarantees a reasonable, peaceful togetherness – and even personal happiness. On this *anthropological fact* – that morality and ethics are possible and that they guarantee human fulfillment, being practical and lived self-knowledge – many philosophers and Christian theologians agree.

The implications of the idea of a creator-god and of unconditional love need to be emphasised again and again: even in the lively and diverse religious environment

51 For purely ethical reasons, however, such a belief and transcendent foundation of ethics is not necessary; it might even be a hindrance to inter-religious and cross-cultural debates on the foundations of morality; that's why Christian theologians have always emphasized the autonomy of ethics and recurred e.g. to a factual or natural moral law all human beings have access to and a basic natural knowledge of (because they can experience it in themselves), cf. e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I.II 94, p. 2.

52 This is one of the results of Aristotle's analysis of being (in his *Metaphysics*): being is dynamic, full of potency (*dynamis*) – which tends towards its realization.

of India which, on principle, can lead to an exemplary stance of openness and respect because of a certain natural familiarity with other religions in daily life. Still, it seems that fundamentalism is also an issue here, even among Christians⁵³, where the moral misunderstanding of religion and the idea of exclusivism come back. Such fundamentalism is the biggest enemy of ecumenism. Another example is the religious situation in the USA: the 'moral God' is still a major issue for American Christians, which makes it easy for certain fundamentalist groups (some Catholic, most not) to attract millions of believers to a form of religiosity which is predominantly anti-ecumenical because it seeks and offers identity and identification (with and of a religious group) by (moral) self-differentiation or de-limitation. It is sad to see that especially those groups seem to be attracting the masses that proclaim, with unbelievable self-righteousness, views of spiritual simplicity that are simply illogical from both an ethical and theological perspective, such as the idea that God gives specific instructions how to live one's life and wants to make us do certain things – instead of understanding that the Christian God wants to watch men and women grow in their freedom. The leaders of these groups proclaim slogans like "Life is really about living for God, not for myself" but confuse this with a specific confession instead of seeing that living for us and others is living for God, it is what He wants us to do⁵⁴.

What do such slogans and ideas have to do with the universality of the divine love? And with the commandment to love one's neighbor? Taken seriously, the latter would actually be enough as a foundation of ecumenism, even without the more 'sophisticated' argument for the intrinsic ecumenical openness of the Christian doctrine. And the Christian commandment to love one's neighbor is actually a relatively easy form of 'love'. This may seem paradoxical at first glance, for it is supposed to be love for everyone and even for the enemy. But it is not the deep commitment of a feeling of love for everyone, identical with the feelings among partners, family or friends; this is not possible for human beings. The *agape* or *caritas* of the gospel (exemplified by Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10,25-37) is *practical help* wherever it is needed⁵⁵. It is concrete attention and care, which overcome all moralizing. Practical care, however, can, once again, only come from an *attitude of mind*: *agape* is a truly ecumenical openness towards everybody, an unconditionality of love that reflects the unconditional love of God. In this love, the being that humans share becomes true humanity: a simple, factual being-with-others is transformed into a being-for-others. This is 'over-human' in another sense as well; it transcends all-too-human ideas of *morality* that are modeled on a human understanding of *justice*, based on the 'principle of reciprocity' or *do ut des* (which is then mistakenly transferred to the relationship

53 Therefore, a recently published article about the drawbacks and negative side effects of the, in itself, rich and vibrant Charismatic movement asked for a "Catholic Self-Critique": A. Prem, "A Catholic Self-Critique", in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 71 (2007), pp. 681-688.

54 A recent example of this is the best-selling and widely discussed book *The Purpose Driven Life* (1st ed. 2002) by pastor and theologian Rick Warren. For a short critique cf. *The Boston Globe*, March 17, 2007, p. B2.

55 On the biblical idea of *agape* cf. e.g. (from an exegetical perspective) F.-J. Nocke, *Liebe, Tod und Auferstehung. Die Mitte des christlichen Glaubens*, München 2005.

with God); the principle of *agape*, on the other hand, is *non-reciprocity*: just as God's love is an unprecedented, unconditional and never-ending gift, Christians should be willing to give and live *agape* without expecting anything back⁵⁶.

III

Tasks for an 'Ecumenical Philosophy'

The attempt in this concluding section will be to bring together Ancient and Christian thought: Stoicism, Aristippus and Catholic theology, in order to outline some concrete perspectives for ecumenism.

3.1. For (Catholic) Christianity, the preceding reflections give a philosophical and theological reason for a radical ecumenical openness; they remind an ecumenical horizon which is proper to the Christian faith right from the beginning; true Catholicism should also be capable of an 'ecumenical' state of mind, just as in Greek philosophy, and not only in an intra-Christian sense of ecumenism as a dialogue between different Christian denominations. Ecumenism is a philosophical state of mind of openness and tolerance, and as such the condition for an encounter of people, peoples, cultures and religions without feelings of superiority, in the 'Aristippian' stance of "let-them-be", accepting others as they are. Christianity might be logically superior to other religions, but its logic consists precisely in its intrinsic ecumenical openness and is, therefore, relativized when it comes to concrete contents. It is no foundation for an exclusivist or inclusivist pretension to superiority, but neither is it – as in a perspective of religious pluralism – just one belief among others⁵⁷. Ecumenism changes the universality of the Christian gospel from the idea of a universal *mission*⁵⁸ to a universal *openness*. Said with Aristotle's and Thomas's terminology of "act" and "potency": the universe is not primarily in a state of passive potency regarding the Christian faith, but in a state of act regarding religious richness, or in a state of active potency: capable of communicating religious truth, insights, and inspirations to Christianity as well; it is full of partners worthy of honour in their very being.

Today, after a long process of self-purification and the rejection of a performance-belief and the threatening moral God, in a right understanding of divine justice as

56 There can still be hope, however, that such a life might be an example for others and thus, ultimately, truly change the world. – A form of realization of *agape is education* (at least in its ideal form), for: a good teacher is willing to share with others what s/he knows without expecting anything back from them in return. – On the principle of reciprocity cf. e.g. J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, 1971.

57 There could be probably an advantage in the secure *knowledge* of salvation Christianity offers, a liberating message *that* frees one from all anxiety and *thus enables* a more human life.

58 A 'missionary mind' is often (not always) determined by the idea that the gospel (not salvation) is principally directed at everybody but that people are free to accept it or not (whether one sees God's grace working in the act of acceptance and assent, i.e. faith, or man's autonomy alone) and if people reject or oppose the Christian faith, they have no chance of salvation, they can be dismissed and excluded from any further consideration and respect. Such an idea can also reintroduce an understanding of faith as an act of individual human 'salvation-earning' (by formally accepting a certain confession or Creed).

justification, searching for a “global ethos”⁵⁹ and for common religious truths, it is possible again to become aware of this original message of the Christian gospel and try to realize it practically in a universal-humanitarian reflection of divine love, as an open participation, in the common endeavour of ecumenism. Unconditional love is a foundation of unconditional ‘ecumenism’. It demands a lived ethos of universal (‘catholic’) humanity, even (or primarily) in questions of the religious confession. This, again, is first of all a call to each one, for an ecumenical attitude of mind, for humanitarian strength, which, Christians gain, among others, from liturgy. The concluding words of the Catholic mass ask to bring the peace and love experienced during the liturgical celebration to others, to everybody. Ancient philosophy can be a model of this, even Stoicism, at least on principle, where speculative (‘philosophical’) theology found its expression in a ‘liturgical act’ (the Hymn to Zeus) which then inspired the practical life of the school members and even politics.

3.2. However, not only Christianity and the religions but *philosophy* as well is called to develop ‘ecumenical’ perspectives, if it wants to face the challenges of the problems that arise in the context of the so-called “clash of civilizations” (S.P. Huntington) which, as it seems, might be dominating the Third Millennium for some time. Here, the term “ecumenical” is again understood in the widest sense of the word as inter-cultural encounter, but it includes religious perspectives. Quite a few Western philosophers and sociologists, trained in a post-modern, atheistic academic world, preferred to take a meta-religious perspective in matters of globalization and inter-cultural dialogue⁶⁰ and thus weren’t prepared to understand many of the problems in this context that actually are a “clash of” *religious ideas*; for, religions are still highly influential in forming culture or “civilizations”⁶¹.

An ecumenical philosophy would have to appeal to the logic of human thought; not only could it try to demonstrate that a peaceful coexistence in mutual respect and mutual inspiration is more reasonable for everybody, but it could also build upon the anthropological commonalities, metaphysical constants and basic convergences in different systems of thought, beyond all apparent contradiction. Starting point and transcendental condition for such an endeavor is a common basis. No form of ‘communication’ can do without discovering a common ground first: as a formal condition on a meta-level (e.g. active command of language) but also with regard to content (we start, for instance, a verbal exchange with a stranger by choosing a

59 Examples of this are Kant’s reflections on *Perpetual Peace* (1795) or, more recently and concretely, the foundation of the UNO and, at present, the UNESCO’s “Global Ethics Project” and H. Küng’s “Projekt Weltethos” but also initiatives of the Church, e.g. manifest in papal documents, from the teaching of Pius XII. (cf. A.-F. Utz; J.F. Groner (ed.), *Aufbau und Entfaltung des gesellschaftlichen Lebens. Soziale Summe Pius XII*, Freiburg/CH 1954) and the encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris* by John XXIII, (1963) to *Fides et Ratio* (1998, see below).

60 For, it seemed, for a while, especially in the West, that religious affiliations and norms and the religious dimension of the human being in general became less important. This, however, has changed recently, and even Western sociologists are now well aware of this change.

61 The worst example of this is the fundamentalist terror of our days which is misleadingly called “Islamism” and, as such, has a certain popularity among the masses.

subject both of us can say something about, and be it only the weather). It is the more important to make people of most diverse cultural backgrounds become conscious of what they – factually – share already: their common human being. Thus, *education* is the most important contribution to establishing true peace in the world. “Ecumenism” means universal encounter, and where this is done with *reason*, according to “common sense”, it should promote humanity, acceptance, respect, tolerance, and unity.

While the word “ecumenism” is usually understood as a Christian endeavor or, at most, as the encounter of religions, I am proposing, recurring to the original meaning of the word *oikumene*, the term “ecumenical philosophy” as an intellectual encounter of human beings and spiritual horizons (with, of course, religion always being an integral part of this). It is helpful to find historical examples of such ways of open encounter, as an inspiration and, at the same time, as a proof of the possibility of such encounter. Research in this field can also help to identify the conditions of such cultural universality. This would be the task for a ‘*historical branch*’ of ecumenical philosophy which would include comparative studies in all fields: religion, cultural studies, philosophy. Possible objects of historical research include e.g. all forms of ‘syncretistic’ systems of thought, often resulting from inter-cultural encounters and including religious elements, which proves, that they are, at least on principle, reconcilable. Christianity itself has been a major exponent in such processes, e.g. in encounters, assimilations, adoptions, inculturation between West and East, Judaism and Hellenism, Roman and German culture, Europe and Asia, industrialized and developing countries, etc. The *systematic* leitmotiv of ecumenical philosophy will be the realization of the logical, philosophical, rational and intellectual potential of the human being, so that, over all the conflicts that exist in the world, the fundamental unity of all forms of life and thought may not be overlooked, for all of them coincide in our common human being. This is again ancient wisdom: reason is common to us, but it can’t be seen or realized if we let passions dominate us (which are in constant opposition).

If such a work of knowledge and education is successful, then people can see the chance of peaceful coexistence. Of course, the Church will play a major part in this. The importance of philosophical reason in this inter-cultural context is acknowledged (with explicit reference to India) by the Magisterium in Pope John Paul II.’s encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998) whose main subject is the relationship between faith and reason, philosophy and theology. Philosophical wisdom and reason is something all human beings and cultures share; and the richness of philosophical reasoning, applied in theology, can lead to practical consequences for our way towards lived humanity⁶²

62 Cf. especially *Fides et Ratio* §§ 1, p. 11, 70ss. The possibility of the unity of mankind is rooted not only in common elements of philosophy to be found in all cultures (even though this might be enough in ethical or political contexts to establish a common ethos) but, more precisely, in a common orientation towards a transcendent divine reality. Even though different religions might not believe in the same God, Christians believe that the entire world was created by one and the same God and “in Christ”. They are all in Christ, and Christ is in them or at least “vestiges” of Christ (from similar ideas, G. Gäde has developed his “interiorism” which he sees as an alternative model for the theology of religions, cf. e.g. his most recent publication on Christianity and Islam:

. The Christian Churches are particularly asked to participate in the inter-cultural, 'ecumenical' efforts of philosophy, or better: all religions that can bank on philosophy because they stand in old philosophical traditions and include elements of – theoretical and practical – philosophy.

Finally, this leads us back to the appellative and modal character of Stoic ethics and self-knowledge. A universal ethos is only attainable by successfully demonstrating what is already there, in the most diverse cultures, religions, civilizations: in human being as such, beyond the cultural differences⁶³ (and not by giving the impression of wanting to impose something alien on other cultures). The potential 'political' unity of humanity is founded in the onto-anthropological potential of the human being: (practical) reason, morality, goodness. But, in a metaphysical and religious horizon, the ultimate reason that a universal ethos truly is attainable is not only the common nature that all human beings share (i.e. reason) but the basic idea of *one* reality beyond all diversity – which transcends the human being. Stoic philosophers and Christians share a belief in a transcendent reality (which, for the Stoics, is manifest in the many names of God and in different religions). Even in a non-Christian and philosophical perspective, though, the oneness of being is the transcendental condition for unity among human beings. Even the human capacity of *consensus* results from the fact that the human spirit can discover objective truth; it is directed towards truth which is one and only, inter-subjective in its objectivity and universally valid (and in religious terms, it is identified with God and thus not only the object but also the origin of human thought). Now, in order to make this knowledge become practical, some things are needed: 1.) to accept, with Aristippus, on principle, all concrete forms of life and of culture as equally valid, while the self can, in the Christian perspective, know and may accept itself as it is, not as deficient but as loved by God, certain of afterlife and salvation. 2.) Still, however, in the field of ethics and politics, the appellative demonstration and realization of common humanity remains a desideratum of untiring educational labor. Our main concern should be to invert the common process of defining identity: from a de-finition (the negative, divisive and excluding delimitation of small groups from others) towards the positive possibilities of seeing common grounds. For the Greeks, this was a result of *self-knowledge*, of the recognition of the universal nature of the self, the humanity that it shared with others. In Stoic self-knowledge, the individual

"Adorano con noi il Dio unico" [Lumen gentium 16]. *Per una comprensione cristiana della fede islamica*, Roma, 2008). *Fides et Ratio* shares Augustine's belief that all philosophical and theological enquiry is directed towards God and that it was initiated by God himself, that the human being has a 'metaphysical nature' (cf. *Confessions* I 1), and it shares the Stoic belief that the fact that all cultures have developed some kind of religion does not only say something about the *conditio humana* but shows that God himself, who truly exists, is its ultimate reason, source, and goal.

63 A philosophical analysis of this unity of the human spirit led Karl Jaspers to his theory of an "axis time": a period in the history of man (ca. 800-500 BC) when most diverse cultures, independently of one another, established the philosophical foundations of human thought which are still valid today; and Jaspers hopes in a 'second axis' of history that would truly unify the diverse worldviews and cultures and thus establish a lived unity and peace on earth; cf. K. Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, München, 1963.

'identified' himself with all other human beings (even though the Stoics lost sight of this idea in certain historical and social realities).

A universal ethos is possible because ethics is universal, because the discovery of the individual's own reason opens a universal perspective: the self has universality in itself; in having reason, all human beings are equal; that's why they all have dignity and should act and be treated accordingly. The ecumenical attitude is anchored in the most immediate and direct knowledge that everybody has: self-knowledge (cf. Aristippus). Here, again, the different meanings of the Latin term *humanitas* converge in a very meaningful way: the individual human being experiences his or her being human (= "humanitas" 1), i.e. having reason (*animal rationale*), and comes to the insight that s/he is not alone with it, but that all humankind (= "humanitas" 2) are of this nature, that it is *common being*; and that all human persons, therefore, deserve 'humanity' (= "humanitas" 3). For the Greeks, even society is rooted in the nature of the individual, in man's social or sociable being (*zoon politikon, animal sociale*⁶⁴), of which we are immediately conscious because we can experience it directly, by and in ourselves.

Methodically, this is the way to follow when trying to convince others of the sense of ecumenism: let them find commonalities in themselves. Of course, the chance to really get to know people from other cultures or religions is also helpful. The obstacles to ecumenical openness start in the mind of those who blindly follow prejudices without reflecting (not necessarily with regard to people from other cultures, but it starts with prejudices against people from the next village). Therefore, education of the uneducated masses is so important, but also the chance to meet people from the next village. Personal knowledge can change everything. While, in my country, Germany, inter-cultural encounter is still very much associated with travelling to other countries and meet foreign cultures there, in India, inter-cultural experience is a 'national affair'. And we don't need to travel to learn to have respect for others. It starts with an attitude of mind towards other groups in our own society, a philosophical stance of unconditional openness; this is 'philosophical' in another sense as well, because it has to do with *reason*, self-distance and education: the subject and goals of any true philosophy.

In conclusion, I may refer to the situation here in Darjeeling District and "Gorkha Land". Many people are concerned about the political tension and latent violence. My wish is that it won't be getting worse; the area's inter-cultural heritage is too rich, and too valuable is its possible exemplarity in inter-cultural 'ecumenism' (proven by some on-going initiatives centered on the attempt at mutual understanding, e.g. between the many religions, such as the "inter-faith forum" or intellectual reflections on *identity*, even organized by Salesian College Sonada). Still, there are too many historic examples

64 In Stoic philosophy, the social being is part of the idea of *oikeiosis* and a direct expression of the rational being of wo/man whose *logos* is made for 'communication' and for a reasonable life together.

of a misunderstood ideal of political liberalism and national or tribal identity that led to passionate political agitation instead of reason and temperance, and sometimes to a complete loss of all ethical self-control with most inhumane consequences. One of the worst examples in recent years was the civil war in Ruanda. In a movie about the conflict, "Hotel Ruanda", there is a revealing scene: the murderers of members of the rival tribe, the Tutsi, only speak of "cockroaches"; this is where philosophy comes in and where education has to start, and why it is so important: The task in trying to create an inter-cultural ecumenical open-mindedness is to make it clear to the individual not only that human beings have dignity and deserve being treated with respect and in a human(e) way, but also that the other is a human being – and not a cockroach.