

we need to encircle ourselves within some fixed – though not rigidly – markers, which gives us orientation and direction. Only through such markers can we grow. Only within such broad framework can we progress.

Will we sing to the dance of death and life or death over life? We can live the dance of death and life leading to deeper life. Maybe we can also learn the dance of spiritualism and science! That could be a mutually enriching venture! 🌱

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The Star of Bethlehem and the ‘Ray of that Truth Which Enlightens All Humans’: Reflections on the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*

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Only a few days after his election as bishop of Rome in 2013, the new Pope, going by the name of Francis, went to a youth prison to celebrate the liturgy of Holy Thursday with incarcerated youngsters. Among conservative circles in the church this led to some consternation when he washed the feet of 12 of these youths. This reaction focused less on the fact that among the youths were two Muslims. The real focus of attention was the previously unheard of washing of the feet of two women.¹ Some people seemed to think that a pope washing the feet of women was the first step to a –presumably terrible – ordination of women to the priesthood. The outrage went so far that the official press officer of the Vatican, Federico Lombardi, had to issue a statement clarifying that the washing of feet did not have the status of a sacrament of the

1 For an example see <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2013/03/the-official-end-of-reform-of-reform-by.html> (visited on 22nd April 2013).

church.²

Possibly this event and the reactions to it illustrate well which points in the now 50 years of the reception of the Vatican Council have become particularly contentious. There is no doubt that the implementation of the council is still incomplete. Furthermore, there is further evidence that in some circles the Vatican Council is viewed with some subsequent suspicion and in some cases with regret. The brotherhood of Pius X under Archbishop Lefebvre and the vacillation over its excommunication and subsequent revocation of the excommunication are just one symbol of this. Another example is the recent reform of the liturgical texts in the English language, which through clumsy Latinisms, antiquated vocabulary and complete rejection of gender inclusive language tries to give the illusion of a prayerful authenticity which gives the lie to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and its vision of an intelligent and inspired people of God participating in the celebration of the sacramental mysteries.

Therefore it is all the more surprising, that in other regards the Council has been received with much enthusiasm and success. Some of the visions of the Council have given the church a completely changed face. The fundamental appreciation of human rights in *Gaudium and Spes* has led to the foundation of justice and peace conferences, and the church has become a leader in confronting the abuses of human rights the world over. In some countries they are the only remaining advocates for freedom and humanitarian rights. The enormous effort poured into the church's activities helping and supporting migrants or the poor is hardly imaginable without the Council. And with *Unitatis Redintegratio* a previously unknown

ecumenical dialogue began that has helped to draw the various churches closer together in a unity that is understood as God's command. Pope John Paul II in 1995 could talk about ecumenism as one of the anchors in the heart of the church in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*. And finally one should mention *Nostra Aetate*, this small document with a large history, perhaps the most prophetic of the Council's documents.³ It did not just change the church's view of other religions; it put traditional views on their head. The most obvious success of this document lies in the change of attitude towards Judaism. This reflects the original intention of the first drafts. But aside from this, the Assisi meetings introduced by John Paul II and the much-admired visit of Benedict XVI in the Hagia Sophia bear witness to the lasting influence of *Nostra Aetate*.

But returning to Pope Francis and the washing of the feet: The reactions to this even, perhaps somewhat exaggerated by the media, nevertheless highlight in an analogous way what seems to have become the fate of the Council's documents. The internal issues of the church seem to lead to controversy and conflict, to disappointment and insecurities. Topics like the ordination of women, the prohibition for remarried divorced or those living in same sex unions to participate sacramentally in the life of the church, the question of priestly celibacy perturb the church to the limits of her resilience and unity. But the transformation of the church in the way it relates to external issues is admired and quite successful. If the pope washes the feet of women, it is a sign of breaking with the tradition, if he washes the feet of Muslims it is a sign of the openness of the church. This openness toward other religions, however, is a matter that did not suggest itself when *Nostra Aetate* was originally put on the table of the council fathers.

2 See <http://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2013-03/fusswaschung-franziskus-frauen> (visited on 22nd April 2013).

3 The reception history is detailed in Roman Siebenrock, "Theologischer Kommentar zur Erklärung über die Haltung der Kirche zu den nichtchristlichen Religionen *Nostra Aetate*," in *Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil Band 3*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Bernd Hilberath, (Freiburg: Herder, 2005): 591–693.

How *Nostra Aetate* became a Council Document

During the third period of the Council the document that was to evolve into *Nostra Aetate* was for the first time put on the agenda of the council.⁴ At the end of September 1964 this document was a short paper concerning Jews and non-Christians. Cardinal Bea introduced it, referring to a specific mandate of Pope John XXIII. Pope John had been acutely touched by the Jewish question during the Second World War and was a personal friend of the Jewish historian Jules Isaac. Furthermore, the then rector of the Biblicum, Ernst Vogt SJ, had presented a petition to the preparatory commission of the Council asking for the treatment of the question of Anti-Semitism. Pope John had asked Cardinal Bea already in 1960 to prepare a document *de Iudaeis*, concerning the Jews. Bea finished work on that document in 1961. But rumors were spread about the document, and it finally reached the public, sparking a storm of outrage and protest among the Arab countries. They feared that the document would lead to the official recognition of the state of Israel by the Vatican. Even the bishops of the region spoke against the document. Internal debates within the church touched mainly on the question of the Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. However, it was precisely Bea's intention to do away once and forever with the thesis of total Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion. Other questions touched on the prayer of the Good Friday prayer for the conversion of the Jews⁵ and the ongoing

4 For the history of the document see John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

5 This prayer was reformulated after the council, but in 2007 it was reintroduced when the Pope approved the Tridentine rite for use in extraordinary circumstances. Even though Benedict XVI approved an emendated version of the controversial prayer, the official Vatican print of the Missal

validity of God's promises to the people of Israel. All these issues led to the document being shelved.

Particularly the pressure of the Arab states led Bea to include passages about other religions as well. The document presented in 1964 dealt mainly with Judaism, and it included one sentence each for Islam and other world religions. the reaction of the council fathers was generally positive. The text was viewed as important, but still an enormous amount of changes was suggested. Some even suggested to remove the text in its entirety. Bea and Pope Paul VI were not in agreement, either. But Bea insisted on "our responsibility for truth and justice, our duty to gratitude towards God, our duty to faithfully and closely follow our Lord Jesus Christ, as did his apostles Peter and Paul."

The discussion went on for two days, and nine more days later Paul VI personally sent a message to the Council that he was disbanding the preparatory commission and that the text should not be a document in its own right but should be incorporated into *Lumen Gentium*. The names proposed by Paul for a new commission were almost entirely those of opponents of Bea's text. Media pounced on the events, conspiracy theories were proposed, and the Council fathers were consternated by this usurpation of the Council's authority and freedom. Paul's actions were perhaps the greatest crisis of the Council in all the years it was in session.

Bea wrote a personal letter to the Pope, and some Council fathers did likewise, among them Cardinal König of Vienna. They warned the Pope to set aside the procedures of the Council in such a delicate matter and to appoint people who did not have the backing of the Council as a whole. the Pope relented and restored the state of affairs previous to his intervention, but he left a bitter aftertaste of willfulness, unclear responsibilities and failed communications.

did not include Benedict's correction but reverted to the more traditional prayer for the conversion of the Jews.

On November 20th, 1964, the document was conditionally approved. The rewriting began, and finally in October 1965 it was approved in its current form. Cardinal Willebrands and Duprey personally visited the Arab ambassadors to hand over the document and assure the Arab nations that it did not include political ramifications. This was certainly a moment of intense personal satisfaction for Cardinal Bea, and it was his personal effort that made this document possible. It is of high symbolic significance that he did so being a German.

Theological Questions

Nostra Aetate is first and foremost a document that tries to formulate the church's relation to Judaism, and only external and political pressure made certain that also reference was made to other religions. The Council did not deal so much with the question how other religions are to be judged in and by themselves. Rather, the document exhibits a perspective that looks inward. The church is asking herself about which position she is to take with regard to religious phenomena outside of herself (NA 1). The document begins with the creation of all humankind in the image of God (NA 1). It searches what all peoples and religions have in common since they share a common origin in the creation of God. This common origin is reflected in a search for unity and love that unites all humans. In the reflection on God's creative power *Nostra Aetate* speaks of a certain "ray of that Truth which enlightens all humans" (*radium illius Veritatis*). It should be noted that "Truth" is capitalized in the original Latin text, implying that in these religions the one who is the Truth is being revealed.

Following the Council this participation of all religions in that ray of Truth became a major topic for theological discussion. Karl Rahner was perhaps the most famous one when he proposed his concept of "anonymous Christians". But of course the choice of words rather than the proposal itself

opened Rahner's theory to a lot of criticism. It suggests that in this theory Christianity appropriates other religions into its own religious system and posits itself as somewhat superior. While this may not have been what Rahner originally attempted to show, the theory has been largely rejected in today's interreligious dialogue. Behind Rahner's attempts lies of course also a christology which was assumed to be indispensable even by *Nostra Aetate*. But this raises of course the question how one can on the one hand believe that the highest possible form of revelation of God has taken place in the historical figure of Jesus, and on the other hand how one can then look at other religions without maintaining an inclusivist attitude.

It is precisely this question, which lies behind an early Christian text of Syriac origin called "The Revelation of the Magi."⁶ The text itself is a popular legend expanding on the story of the Magi in the Gospel of Matthew. It found a rather wide audience in Early Christianity and into the Middle Ages. The text is now only available in a manuscript copy from the 8th century which is kept in the Vatican library. But this copy itself bears witness to the book's popularity by its date. While the text bears some striking resemblance to the Matthean version of the story of the Magi it follows very different theological purposes.

The Magi in Mt 2

The story of the Magi from the East is one of the New Testament narratives which have met with an almost unqualified success. No manger is put under a Christmas tree without the three wise men or kings, they got their own

6 For the English translation of the text and a very informative commentary see Brent Landau, *Revelation of the Magi. The Lost Tale of the Three Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem*, (New York: HarperOne, 2010). The comments on the text and its history here rely on Landau's analysis.

liturgical feast shortly after Christmas, and in Europe many children dressed up as the three kings come to Bethlehem make their rounds in villages and towns to collect money for charitable purposes, called “gifts for the holy child”. The Magi’s own presents of gold, frankincense, and myrrh is the foundation of the tradition of Christmas gifts.

And yet, Matthew’s story is somewhat odd. Matthew 2 tells of Magi from the East who follow a star which they lose from sight in Jerusalem. But on leaving Jerusalem they find the star again and follow it to Bethlehem where they worship the newborn child and open their treasures, before they leave secretly and on byroads not only the child but also the Gospel.⁷ The gaps in Matthew’s narrative are obvious: The Magi do not have a concrete place of origin; they do not have names or number. Later tradition fixes their number at three and invents names for them, even makes them kings. But even the title is somewhat irritating: Magi are usually unsavory people. Already Euripides and Sophocles connect them with witchcraft, magic, and deceit. The Acts of the Apostles know of Magi in a similar sense (Ac 8:1–25; 13:6.8). Matthew’s story is the single positive mention of such Magi in the whole Bible. The star is mysterious as well: first it appears to the Magi in the East, in Jerusalem it seems to disappear, and finally outside of Jerusalem it appears again only to come to rest over the birthplace of Jesus.⁸ We are never told how the

Magi know that they should follow the star, or how they know about the newborn king they seek. In the end it remains a mystery how the Magi arrive at the manger – which, in Matthew, is a house, after all.

Mysterious people, therefore, whose literary function in the Gospel is to form a contrast to a scheming king Herod and his unbelieving court of scribes and chief priests. Perhaps it is just the scarcity of information we have about the Magi that led already early Christianity to find names, numbers, to illustrate the story with camels and kings.⁹ More modern minds tried to find the precise combination of stars that would produce a natural phenomenon like the one described by Matthew’s star.¹⁰ One of these fanciful imaginations around the Magi is the legend of the “Revelation of the Magi” with its question about how one can know about God outside of Christian or indeed ecclesiastical structures. The work is somewhat verbose, beginning in the Garden of Eden and ending with the baptism of the Magi by the apostle Thomas. It is the most substantial work of early Christianity relating to the Magi. Even though today the work is mostly forgotten it seems to have enjoyed quite a run in antiquity. The very popular commentary on the Gospel of Matthew called the *Opus Imperfectum*, dating from the 5th century, must have known the story as a written source. The copy in the Vatican Library is a manuscript dating to the 8th century, found in the Turkish monastery of Zuqnin.

7 Still a good commentary on this story is Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah. A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, 2nd ed., ABRL, (New York: Doubleday, 1993): 165–201.

8 Birth narratives of famous people in antiquity were often connected with the appearance of a spectacular star; see Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 4 vols. vols., EKK, (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger Neukirchener Verlag, 1985–2002): I:119. However, the star in Mt 2 is less

connected to the birth of Jesus than it is to the guidance of the Magi.

9 See Thomas Holtmann, *Die Magier vom Osten und der Stern. Mt 2,1–12 im Kontext frühchristlicher Traditionen*, Marburger theologische Studien, vol. 87, (Marburg: Elwert, 2005).

10 As an example, see Simo Parpola, “The Magi and the Star. Babylonian Astronomy Dates Jesus’ Birth,” *BiRe* 17:6, (2001), 16–23, 52, 54.

The Dating of the Text of the “Revelation of the Magi”

It seems that the Syriac “Revelation of the Magi” is dating back to the 4th century. While the extant manuscript dates to the 8th century, and while the *Opus Imperfectum* from the 5th century knows the story, the text itself suggests that it is even earlier than that. One of the quirks of the Syriac language is that in its early form, the word for “Holy Spirit” is of female gender. This changes as Syriac develops, perhaps under the influence of Greek and Latin. By the end of the 4th century Syriac employs the masculine Gender for the Holy Spirit. Since in the main part the text uses the female words for the Holy Spirit it must have been written before the change took place. This means that the text probably existed by the beginning or middle of the 4th century.

Furthermore, the final chapters of the text relate the visit by the Apostle Thomas. These chapters now seem to rely heavily on the “Acts of Thomas” and other legends surrounding Thomas. The “Acts of Thomas” were written probably around the late 3rd or early 4th century. The chapters connected with the visit of Thomas have several peculiarities. Firstly, they use the masculine form for the Holy Spirit. Secondly, while the main body of the “Revelation of the Magi” is written in a first person narrative, the Thomas-chapters switch to the third person. The main text never speaks of Jesus or Jesus Christ, while the Thomas-chapters use the name more than 20 times. All this indicates that the final chapters about the visit of the Apostle Thomas are a later addition to the text. If one takes into account that the text of the “Revelation” needed some time for popularization in order to merit the addition of the Thomas-chapters, one can safely conclude that the main body of the text could have been in existence as early as the 3rd century.

The Content of the “Revelation of the Magi”

The text of the “Revelation of the Magi” is told mostly in the first person and relates the story of the Magi and their journey to the child of Bethlehem together with their return to their home country. The Magi are described as the members of a mystical order in the mythical land of Shir in the extreme East of the world, bordering the ocean that marks the end of the world. They are called Magi because they pray in silent meditation. Obviously the text refers to some form of play on the language, but the play does not work in any of the languages we know. On the other hand, this description helps to distinguish these Magi from magicians, wizards, astrologers, or Zoroastrians.

These silent prayerful people are the direct descendants of Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. Seth gave his descendants a prophecy: A star of indescribable radiance would one day appear and announce the birth of God in human form. This star, so the Sethian prophecy, rested once in paradise above the tree of life and illuminated the whole Garden of Eden. But with the sin of Adam and Eve this star disappeared.

Over thousands of years the order of the Magi came together every month to await the arrival of the star, using ancient rituals known only to them. They climb the most holy mountain of their land Shir, the Mountain of Victories. There they pray silently at the mouth of the cave of the treasure of hidden mysteries. In the cave the books of Seth are kept and often read by the Magi. Should one of them die his son takes his place.

Now one day the star indeed does appear, and everything is like the old prophecies foretold: The star is so bright that the sun loses its glow in comparison. Since it is only the Magi who preserve the Sethian prophecies it is to them alone that the star appears. No one else can see it. The star comes down onto the mountain and invites the Magi to enter the cave. There the star slowly reveals a small, radiant child. This child

now reveals that he is the Son of God, yet he does not reveal his name, nor is his name mentioned in the following chapters.

The child instructs the Magi to follow him to Jerusalem to witness his birth and take part in the salvation God has prepared for the whole world. The vision disappears, and the Magi come down from the mountain and discover in their talks and discussions, that every one of them has seen the child, but that each one saw the child in a different form or figure. And everyone seems to have seen the child at a different stage of his development. But the joy and elation at this vision is the same for everyone. And everyone agrees that they have seen the same child, albeit in different forms.

The preparations for the journey take some time, but the journey itself meets no obstacles at all. The star removes all hindrances and difficulties, the travelers never tire, wild animals cannot harm the Magi, and at the end of the journey the travelers seem to have spent just a moment's time to cover the great distance between Shir and Jerusalem. During the journey the star transforms the packed food into a deeply spiritual nourishment that gives strength to body and soul. It is at the description of events in Jerusalem that the story actually has direct and literal connections with the story in Matthew's Gospel – the only time that the "Revelation of the Magi" directly depends on the Gospels at all. The inhabitants of Jerusalem cannot see the star. They only see the Magi looking into heaven searching for the lost star and assume that they are astrologers. Herod and his scribes and chief priests make their unsavory appearance, and upon hearing the prophecy of the Old Testament also quoted by Matthew the star appears to them again.

It leads them to a cave near Bethlehem. As it did on the Mountain of Victories, the star again enters the cave and invites the Magi to come in as well. The star now is miraculously transformed into a child and lauded and praised by unseen angels with songs and music. The child explains in

a long speech that the promises of old are now fulfilled and declares the Magi to witnesses and messengers of this fulfillment in their home country. At this point it is interesting to note that the child is not actually born of Mary. The story does not speak of the messy details of childbirth but instead describes a morphing of the star into the child.

As the Magi leave the cave they come upon Mary and Joseph. Mary begins to berate the Magi for the attempt to steal her child. But the Magi calm Mary down and explain to her that the child is indeed the redeemer of the whole world who can be in many places at the same time and thus cannot be stolen at all.

The Magi begin their homeward journey to Shir. Again the power of the star makes the journey miraculous. The light of the star again transforms the provisions for the travel, and as the Magi eat from the star-food, they begin to see their companions in very different forms and appearances, transformed into goodness and beauty. At Shir's border relatives and friends are already waiting and wonder at the health and good looks of the Magi after their long travels. The Magi tell of their adventures with the star, and they assure those who had been left home that they, too, can partake in the miracles and presence of the star-child because he is present in the whole world. As the Magi now produce the provisions of the star and invite the people to eat, all people see visions of the divine and human redeemer, yet each one in a different and individual appearance. Many in the land of Shir come to believe in the star-child proclaimed by the Magi.

This would be a very happy ending for the story, and indeed, for a while it seems to have been that. Yet later on the chapters concerning the apostle Thomas were added. In these Thomas chances upon Shir during his travels many years later. The Magi share their experiences with the star and the child. Thomas recognizes that they indeed did have contact with Jesus Christ, and he begins to share his own experiences with Jesus. The Magi are exceedingly happy when they hear Thomas' witness and ask him to be taken into the Christian

community. On a Sunday morning Thomas baptizes the Magi. At this moment the heavenly Christ descends from heaven and shares the eucharist among Thomas and the newly baptized, thus sealing the new communion between Thomas and the Magi. Thomas then missions the Magi to preach the Gospel throughout the whole world, and the Magi begin to preach and to perform miracles.

The Message of the “Revelation of the Magi”

As has been mentioned already, one of the most prominent features of the text is the complete avoidance of the name of Jesus Christ except in the Thomas-chapters. This is surprising in the light of the way the text describes the individual visions of the star or the child. Throughout one notices how these descriptions are informed by biblical texts of both Old and New Testament. One description is of an unsightly person who takes upon himself the sin of the world – a clear allusion to the servant songs of Isaiah. One finds the image of a lamb being lifted up onto the tree of life – the Gospel of John is in the background here. The pillar of fire from Exodus makes an appearance, and the frequent mention of the nourishment changed by the star seems to be full of eucharistic overtones – an allusion that is made explicit in the Thomas-chapters. Thus it is not an exaggeration to say that the story of the legend lives by biblical imagery, to the extent that it often is a re-reading and re-telling of biblical texts. The interpretations of the star and the child are informed by christologies found in the New Testament. If the name of the child is never mentioned one has to draw the conclusion that the text wants to suggest the Magi and the inhabitants of Shir have a revelation of Christ without knowing Christ. The text raises the possibility of the Son of God revealing himself to many people, in very different forms and appearances, without ever revealing himself as Jesus Christ. It precisely at this point that the diffuseness of differentiation between the star and the

child becomes important. This constant shape shifting of the appearance suggests that the reality of what appears cannot be tied to a specific form, be it star or child. And for that reason the text insists that everyone who has an apparition of the heavenly appearance sees something different. The text thus emphasizes the individuality and experiential nature of the appearance, while at the same time acknowledging that behind this individuality of revelation there is a commonality that lets the Magi and their friends to recognize in their various apparitions a sameness that points to the redeemer of the world.

This impression gains support from the things that the heavenly star-child says to the Magi. First of all, it tells the Magi that it is appearing to them in a manner consonant with their traditional religion. At the same time, however, it is appearing to others in accord with their traditional religions. The appearance to the Magi is just one apparition among many others, because the child “is sent to fulfill all that has been said about me in the whole world and in every country” (13:10). The Magi accept this without reservation, and when in Jerusalem they tell Herod: “We have seen a sign of heavenly glory in our land as it was foretold by our fathers, that a King, a Messiah, a Lifegiver and Redeemer, who gives himself over to death for the salvation of the whole world, is born here... And he ordered us in a great vision to come into this land and worship him, because he has worshippers in every country” (17:5–6). And addressing themselves to Mary the Magi say: “His modes of appearance are seen in every country, because he was sent from His Majesty for the salvation and redemption of every single human person” (23,4).

The fundamental message of the “Revelation of the Magi” begins with the sending of Jesus for the salvation of the whole world, a message that is quite common in early Christianity. But the message of the Magi goes on to draw conclusions from this, which go far beyond early Christian thought. The revelation of Jesus is, so the text, the source of every religious

faith and praxis, independent of the actual confession of Jesus Christ as the savior. When the Magi speak of the fulfillment of their ancient promises founded on the teachings of Adam and Seth, it is for them, as they say, “only a drop of the salvation of the house of the Majesty” (15,1). It is a limited instance of the universal and salvific revelation of Jesus Christ that realizes itself in endless possibilities. The most prominent example of this is the appearance of the child in the cave on the Mountain of Victories: Here the child appears even before he is born in Bethlehem. Another quotation may illustrate this point further:

And I am everywhere, because I am a ray of light, whose light shone into this whole world from the majesty of my father who sent me to fulfill all that has been said about me in the whole world and in every land in inexpressible mysteries, and to do the commandment of my glorious father who through the prophets proclaimed me to a quarreling house, in the same way as was revealed to you about me, just as it is fitting according to your faith (13:10).

One conclusion from this is that the “Revelation of the Magi” has a much more positive image of non-Christian religions than other texts of this time. The rather strange encounter between the Magi and Mary seems to reflect on this when Mary tries to protect her child from theft by the Magi, while the Magi have to teach her that the child is everywhere. While even in early Christianity there was occasionally room for the idea that famous people like Socrates or Plato had some inkling of divine revelation, such inspirations were usually considered inadequate or downright misleading in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. The vast majority of the Christians of the time would probably have viewed other religions and other gods as illusions or even demonic. The “Revelation” seems to indicate quite differently that such religions have their own revelation of God, quite independent of Christianity. However, the divine aspect of salvation and redemption is the bond between Christianity as perhaps

represented by Mary and the other religions represented by the Magi.

A second conclusion can be drawn from the text. If non-Christian religions indeed contain their own and appropriate revelation, then an active mission in order to convert people of other faith traditions seems quite beside the point, even counter-productive. The conviction that Christ missioned his disciples to proclaim his message is not necessarily excluded by such a statement. But firstly the Magi seem to be convinced that Christ himself is the revealer who searches for his disciples and sends them out. This is most immediately not a mission within religious or ecclesiastical structures, but it is an invitation to witness to the revelation. Thus the Magi are missionaries in the sense that they proclaim the star-child, but they do not proclaim a faith-based church. Or in other words, the mission of the Magi is a mission to help people discover the revelation inherent in their respective religious belief systems. The text does not question the conviction that the message of the revelation should be carried into the world to all peoples, but it very much questions an ecclesiastically organized, supervised, and structured mission.

The Thomas-Chapters

At this point it becomes perhaps clearer why some subsequent readers might have found it necessary to append the chapters of Thomas’ visit in Shir. The original ending of the “Revelation” describes the Magi’s experience of Christ as complete and inimitable. It describes an experience of the abiding presence of the star-child quite apart from an ecclesiastical structure. The Thomas-chapters now settle this experiential theology into a framework in which the Magi and their families are baptized and receive the Eucharist, and where they are explicitly sent not only by the star-child, but now also by an apostle, a representative of a structured church. One could argue that in these chapters the Magi are ecclesiastically domesticated.

But it seems to me that the Thomas-chapters have an indirect and secondary function as well. After all, in these chapters it is the Magi themselves who ask for baptism, and long before the baptism Thomas recognizes that they experienced with the star-child what Thomas then calls a Christ-revelation. Thomas acknowledges that “the grace of our Lord has been poured out over them in richest measure” (29:4). Thus the chapters not only celebrate the final unity of Magi and church in baptism, Eucharist, and mission. They celebrate also the truth of the theology before these chapters. While the Magi are baptized, once again the heavens open, and once again the star-child appears and proclaims: “Peace be with you, children of my mysteries. Behold, now all visions and revelations given to you from the first day are fulfilled in your birth” (31:1). And Thomas responds with equal magnanimity:

We praise your sweet majesty, your unity in many persons, your magnificent images which you have shown us, and the cloths you have worn for our profit so that we might be clothed with your glorious majesty. And despite the many names by which you are called you are not in any one of these, because you alone know your great name and your majesty, and your exalted father, and nobody else (31:3–4).

Final Reflections

This paper cannot make a judgment how *Nostra Aetate* has to be interpreted, or what the importance of the “Revelation of the Magi” with regard to the interreligious dialogue should be, although I have to admit that I find the text of immediate appeal to my own theological convictions. But I should like to point out two areas of discussion in which the “Revelation of the Magi” can be of assistance.

The first of these concerns the priority of Christology asked for by the Council. If it is true that the non-Christian religions on the one hand contain in some measure truth and salvation, but on the other hand contain only a ray of the truth whose

fullness comes to fruition in Christianity, or perhaps even more precisely in the Catholic church, then this is an approach to the question of the phenomenon of many religions which tries to defend the superiority of Christianity over other religions with the help of Christological arguments. Indeed, it is perfectly possible, and even customary, to follow such an approach.

The “Revelation of the Magi” seems to oppose such an approach by maintaining in this beautiful image of the star becoming child and the child becoming star that the content of that “ray of truth” is not some abstract idea but Christ himself. This certainly is the message of the Thomas-chapters whose goal it is to make the story ecclesiastically palatable. Yet it ought to be noted that the story before that does not need to name the child, even if the allusions are clearly to Jesus. Furthermore, even the incarnation, while referred to as a birth of the Son of God, assumes the form of a very strange shape-shifting of the star, and it takes place not only in Bethlehem but also long before that on the Mountain of Victories. Thus while for Christian eyes the star and the child are clearly to be identified with Jesus Christ, the Magi do not make this connection, and the story implies that they do not need this identification either. This accords well with the repeated assertion that the star and the child appear in many lands to many people according to their own traditions. One might, from a Christian perspective, speak of Christ as a symbol that is correlated to other symbols in other religions.¹¹

Such a language dissolves any claims of Christian superiority, but at the same time it maintains the Christological priority the council asked for. It seems to me that the Council documents themselves can well be read in this way. When *Nostra Aetate* speaks of the *radium illius Veritatis*, it capitalizes – and thus personalizes – the Truth inherent in other religions. This is borne out by crossreading into *Gaudium et Spes* 22: “It is not

11 Controversial but important in this context is Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999).

surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown,” or into *Lumen Gentium* 67 where Christ himself is the source of all truth.

If one takes this personal approach to this “ray of truth” seriously, then any claim to Christian superiority forbids itself immediately. Instead, Christianity has to meet other religions on a level of equality. While theology does not always catch up with this approach, it seems to me that the Assisi-meetings inaugurated by John Paul II point at least symbolically into this direction.¹²

A second area for reflection suggests itself. While the interreligious dialogue in Europe is first and foremost a theoretical enterprise, the need for such dialogue presents itself much more forcefully in countries with a vibrant presence of many religious traditions. In such contexts the questions raised do not just concern reflection on an intellectual level but demand practical and concrete dialogue. This tends to be often much less clear-cut and more messy than theoretical deliberations. Yet it is in these regions where interreligious dialogue is not just an academic enterprise but a demand of life that the most fruitful results of such a dialogue are to be expected. Thus it may not surprise that it is precisely in the field of Indian Christology where the dialogue with other religious traditions leads to new and often unexpected formulations of the Christ¹³ who is the ray of truth illuminating all religions. ☸

12 These meetings began in 1986 as prayer meetings at the instigation of John Paul II. The Pope faced afterwards allegations of syncretism and relativism. At the forth and so far last meeting in 2011 Pope Benedict XVI intended to use the meeting to proclaim the contents of his encyclical *Dominus Iesus* and thus forestall any suspicion of relativizing the Catholic faith.

13 Let me name but three more recent examples from India: Joseph Gilbert Reginald Lobo, *Towards a Metaphorical*

Nostra aetate (Latin: In our Time) is the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council. Passed by a vote of 2,221 to 88 of the assembled bishops, this declaration was promulgated on October 28, 1965, by Pope Paul VI.

The Declaration begins by describing the unity of the origin of all people, and the fact that they all return to God; hence their final goal is also one. It describes the eternal questions which have dogged men since the beginning, and how the various religious traditions have tried to answer them.

It mentions some of the answers that some Hindus, Buddhists, and members of other faiths have suggested for such philosophical questions. It notes the willingness of the Catholic Church to accept some truths present in other religions in so much as they reflect Catholic teaching and may lead souls to the Christ.

Part three goes on to say that the Catholic Church regards the Muslims with esteem, and then continues by describing some of the things Islam has in common with Christianity and Catholicism: worship of One God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, Merciful and Omnipotent, Who has spoken to men; the Muslims' respect for Abraham and Mary, and the great respect they have for Jesus, whom they consider to be a Prophet and not God. The synod urged all Catholics and Muslims to forget the hostilities and differences of the past and to work together for mutual understanding and benefit.

Part four speaks of the bond that ties the people of the 'New Covenant' (Christians) to Abraham's stock (Jews). It states that even though some Jewish authorities and those who followed them called for Jesus' death, the blame for this cannot be laid at the door of all those Jews present at that time, nor can the Jews in our time be held as guilty, thus repudiating an indiscriminate charge of Jewish deicide; 'the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God'. The Declaration also decries all displays of antisemitism made at any time by anyone. (From Wikipedia)

Christological Discourse in India: An Alternative Way of Doing Christology in a Cry-For-Life Situation Based on the Writings of Georg M. Soares-Prabhu, (Bangalore: ATC Publications, 2005); Richard Lopes, *Indian Christology of the Way*, ITS 86, (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2011); John Pudota, *Indian Faces of Jesus*, (Gujarat: Anand, 2012).