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## Entering into the Profound Mystery: Yves Congar's Via Media on the Salvation of People of Non-Christian Religions

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Entering into the Profound Mystery: Yves Congar's *Via Media* on the Salvation of People of  
Non-Christian Religions

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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY·SEMINARY  
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Entering into the Profound Mystery: Yves Congar's *Via Media* on the Salvation of People of Non-Christian Religions

The twenty-first century Catholic Church is in the process of understanding its relation to the Second Vatican Council. Yves Congar, one of the most influential theologians at the council, had a theological career spanning over fifty years, and his theological insights remain pertinent to contemporary historical and cultural concerns. This paper describes Yves Congar's particular ecclesiological, pneumatological and Christological insights in response to the question of the salvation of people of non-Christian religions. Congar seeks to find a *via media*, or middle way, which denies two extreme perspectives, one of which holds that explicit non-Christians are not saved, and the other affirms the salvation of all people regardless of their professed religious tradition. Although his work is not extensive on the question of the salvation of adherents of non-Christian religions, he offers theological insights that reflect the Roman Catholic Church's shift in understanding of this question demonstrated in the Vatican II documents. In this paper, I differ from other scholars who have sought to elucidate Congar's *via media* by considering a wider range Congar's writings in addition to Congar's explicit discussion of salvation outside the Church. In doing so, I provide a more accurate appraisal of his understanding of the salvation of people of non-Christian religions, recognizing that his extensive writings on the Church, the Holy Spirit, Christ, and salvation must be considered in order to understand his articulation of the salvation of adherents of non-Christian religions.

This paper may be duplicated.

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Yves Congar begins the preface of his book, *The Wide World My Parish*, with these words: “Christians have simultaneously become newly conscious of their minority position in the world and of the absolutely universal character of God’s ‘plan.’”<sup>1</sup> Congar here demonstrates how people living in the mid-twentieth century were more acutely aware of the growing diversity of peoples, perspectives, cultures, and religions in the world. Over fifty years later, the state of affairs has become even more complicated. Technology has advanced, wars have occurred, and many people know the expansiveness and diversity of the globe, and even the universe. Moreover, many men and women of the twenty-first century mindset no longer submit to Congar’s claim that the Christian God has a universal plan for all. As we continue into the second decade of the twenty-first century, we tend to recognize the importance of the particular over and above the universal, as well as a profound awareness of how large and diverse the world is. And yet as communication and transportation become easier, the world seems a much smaller place. Not only does the world seem smaller, but Christianity is being forced to reckon with the question of its own claim to salvation in and through Jesus Christ in contrast to the claims to salvation found in other religions.

Theologians have presented interpretations and identified the implications of this issue at least since Ernst Troeltsch wrote at the turn of the twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> but the topic has become significantly more pressing in the last thirty years. The majority of scholarship on this issue involves speculative theological arguments in order to find a way to respect both Christianity’s absolute claims and other religions’ professed beliefs regarding salvation. No single theologian has attended to all the consequences or resolved the tensions caused by the dissonance between

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<sup>1</sup> Yves Congar, *The Wide World My Parish: Salvation and its Problems*, Donald Attwater, trans. (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961) Preface ix.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1971).

Christianity's absolute and universal claim to salvation in Christ and other religions' claims. One of the theologians who addresses this question of Christianity amidst (and sometimes over against) the truth claims made by those of other religions is the French Dominican theologian, Yves Congar. Most often known for his work on the Holy Spirit,<sup>3</sup> ecumenism,<sup>4</sup> and the role of the laity,<sup>5</sup> Congar also discusses some implications that his perspective on the issue has on ecclesiology, Trinitarian theology, and most importantly, soteriology. He believes that the Christian concern for other religions is primarily soteriological. In other words, he asks what Christianity claims salvation to be and whether explicit non-Christians are able to be saved. While it is true that Congar does not develop a theology around this question, as many subsequent theologians have done, he offers a nuanced understanding of the salvation of people of professedly non-Christian religions.<sup>6</sup>

Congar is one of many theologians who contribute to a paradigm shift in theological method called *Nouvelle Théologie*; these theologians react against both the claims of modernism<sup>7</sup> and of Neo-Scholasticism<sup>8</sup> and return to the theology of early Church Fathers and scripture, bringing these ideas into conversation with the historical and cultural needs of their time. Theologians such as Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, Marie Dominique-Chenu, and Hans Urs

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<sup>3</sup> Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of Laity* (Westminster: Newman Press, 1965).

<sup>6</sup> Many who address the issue of salvation outside the Church discuss non-evangelized peoples, non-believers, as well as adherents of other religions. Congar expresses a zeal for evangelization which I will not be addressing directly in this paper. I will limit the scope of this paper to Congar's theological nuances on the idea of salvation of people of non-Christian religions.

<sup>7</sup> I use this term to refer to a type of theology, taking place roughly since the Enlightenment. The theological method during the modern period can be categorized generally by dependence on an overarching structure and expressed primarily in propositional truth claims.

<sup>8</sup> Neo-Scholasticism is a style of theology influenced by the modernist tendency to rely on the soundness of propositional truth claims and an overemphasis and reification of the theology of Thomas Aquinas.

von Balthasar were trained in the theology of Thomas Aquinas, but departed from the Neo-Scholastic interpretations of Thomistic theology and promoted the idea that theology must recognize the encounter between the world and the vast Christian tradition formed and shaped by various historical and cultural contexts. The work of these men, and particularly of Congar, witnesses to a paradigm shift in theological method and is, in part, the impetus for the Second Vatican Council.<sup>9</sup> The claims made at Vatican II, it must not overlook the reflections of these *Nouvelle Théologiens* for at least two reasons: the first, because contemporary theological insights are made possible by to the methodological shift of returning to the sources (*ressourcement*) of these New Theologians, and the second because the theology of the Second Vatican Council, as representative of the influence of *Nouvelle Théologie* is still in need of actualization in Christian practice today.<sup>10</sup> Congar, in responding to the question of salvation of people of other religions, would like to find a *via media*, or middle way, between the two extreme positions, one which is overly negative, and one which is too positive.<sup>11</sup> The overly negative position claims that no one is saved outside of the visible sacramental institution of the Christian Church (and for some theologians, specifically the Roman Catholic Church), while the other extreme, posits that all religions equally share in the claim to afford salvation.

In this project, I will attempt to identify the major issues that Congar addresses in his attempt at a *via media* in response to Christianity's question regarding the salvation of adherents of non-Christian religions. Congar's influence on the ecclesiological, pneumatological, and soteriological claims in the documents of the Second Vatican Council nuances the claims made

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on the context for this movement and the unique theological contributions of each of these men, see Hans Boersma's *Nouvelle Theologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas R. Potvin, "Yves Congar on *Missio ad Gentes*," *Science et Esprit*, 55 (2003): 140.

by the Council on the traditional axiom, “No salvation outside the Church.” Precisely because Congar so strongly influenced the Council’s theological content which continues to be pertinent in the twenty-first century, his thoughts on the areas of ecclesiology, pneumatology, and Christology ought to be heard amidst the many approaches on this issue.

In order to understand adequately Congar’s theological ideas, we will need first to identify important aspects of his beliefs on who (not what) the Church is, and his Irenaean understanding of the work of Christ and the Spirit in bringing about the salvation of the human person as the “two hands of God.” We must begin with these two topics in order to recognize that a correct understanding of Congar’s rather brief discussions on the particular issue of salvation outside the Christian religion alone is not entirely sufficient. Further, these ecclesiological and Trinitarian reflections will help us to address adequately what Thomas Potvin identifies as the “development Congar’s thought underwent as he met new challenges and new ideas during his long and highly productive, active career which spanned some fifty years.”<sup>12</sup> In order to capture the richness in his evolution of thought, I am choosing to refer to a wider variety of sources than many other interpreters of Congar’s work on this topic.<sup>13</sup> I will now make the first step toward this solution by examining Congar’s thoughts on ecclesiology.

### **Reformer of the Church that He Loved: Yves Congar’s Ecclesiology**

Yves Congar had a deep-rooted love and passion for the Church, for “as he explained to Jean Puoyo in 1975, ‘I am of the Church. I love the Church.’ This love is based on a simple yet profound truth that he recognized the Church as the Mother, the hearth and the homeland of his

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Potvin “Yves Congar on *Missio ad Gentes*,” 139.

<sup>13</sup> See Thomas Potvin, “Yves Congar on *Missio ad Gentes*,” Thomas O’Meara, “Yves Congar: Theologian of Grace in a Wide World,” Stephen Fields, “Mediating the Non-Christian Religions: Congar, Balthasar, Nature and Grace,” and Terrence Merrigan, “The Appeal to Yves Congar in Recent Catholic Theology of Religions: The Case of Jacques Dupuis.



spiritual being.”<sup>14</sup> It is this passion and zeal that likely motivated Congar to spend so much time and energy advocating for reform about the body for which he cared so much. Of the many ecclesiological insights of which Congar spoke, I find four to be the most pertinent to the issue of the salvation of those of non-Christian religions: the Church as instituted by Christ and constantly pointing towards Christ, the Church as mystical Body which also includes hierarchy, the Church that lives in and acts for the world with a missionary zeal, and the inseparability of ecclesiology and anthropology. Each of these four insights demonstrates the unique way in which Congar articulated his ideas on the topic of the salvation of adherents of non-Christian religions.

In Congar’s book published in 1969, *This Church that I Love*, he identified four levels at which the Church operates. The first of these is that the “Church has no meaning except in relation to Christ and to the Gospel that makes Christ known.”<sup>15</sup> This idea at first seems to be quite obvious, but it was primary for Congar. The Church, according to Congar, is that which is constituted by Christ and acts as a historical place in which the world encounters the person of Jesus Christ. The Church cannot exist without Christ, and therefore all of its actions ought to lead directly to the person and mission of Christ. Congar proclaims, “The Church, like Jesus Christ, is a gift made by God to the world, to draw the world back to him.”<sup>16</sup> Seen in this way, the Church is an earthly extension of Christ active and present in history. Congar does not wish to conflate the Church with the figure of Christ, but to emphasize that the mission of the Church is, however imperfectly, a continuation of the Jesus Christ’s mission while on earth. The Church,

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<sup>14</sup> Flynn, Gabriel, “Yves Congar’s Vision of the Church in a World of Unbelief,” in *Yves Congar: Theologian of the Church*, Gabriel Flynn, ed. (Louvain: Eerdmans, 2005), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Yves Congar, *This Church that I Love*, Lucien Delafuente, trans. (Denville: Dimension Books, 1969), 97

<sup>16</sup> Yves Congar, *Christians active in the World*, P.F Hepburne-Scott, trans. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 69-70.

therefore, cannot be the source of grace itself, but exists only because of Christ (and the work of the Spirit) and the incarnation. The Christological implications of this idea will be addressed in the next section, but for now, it is important to note that fundamentally, the Church's primary purpose is to point towards Jesus Christ and make him present sacramentally; in other words, the Church's actions ought to lead people to Christ, explain the mystery of Christ's life and actions, and inspire moral response in imitation of Jesus Christ the incarnate Word of God.

Christ, the first level at which the Church operates enables the second level, the mystical body comprised of those who are in baptized. Congar states, "The Church is a communion of saints, a sanctifying community."<sup>17</sup> It is through the Church's foundation in Christ that members of the Christian Church are enabled to not only participate in, but actually to be the mystical body of Christ. Each baptized person makes present the work of Christ in and through history. Congar's second level departs from the dominant ecclesiological model that had operated in Neo-Scholasticism: the hierarchical model. Not only are the pope, bishops, and priests participants in the "making present" of Christ, as in the Eucharist, but each believer comprises the *ecclesia*, the Christian community, the body of Christ in their everyday living of the Gospel.<sup>18</sup> This sense of *ecclesia* is a very ancient understanding of which the Church had lost sight, and one which Congar retrieves in the spirit of *ressourcement* (returning to the sources), one of the major methodological approaches of the theologians who contributed to Nouvelle Theologie.<sup>19</sup>

This mystical body of believers is an extension of the work of Christ himself in each believer's living and acting in the world. Two results of the Church considered as a mystical

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<sup>17</sup> Yves Congar, *This Church that I Love*, 97.

<sup>18</sup> Yves Congar, *Christians Active in the World*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> A rather common idea, but articulated particularly well in Gabriel Flynn's *Yves Congar's Vision of the Church in a World of Unbelief* 29-30.

body living in the world speak to additional levels at which Congar sees the Church operating. The first of these, he says, is “the grand pomp of formulas, rites, organizations, rules and traditions” which he says “protect and communicate life.”<sup>20</sup> It seems that Congar, in choosing the somewhat jocular term “grand pomp,” hints that such acts have sometimes been over-emphasized to the exclusion of other important ecclesial acts (such as social justice, evangelism, the quality of community life in the parish), but that he realizes their importance for the continuation, of the Christian tradition. This central core of beliefs, held together by statements of faith (*fides quae*) in order to promote the Christian message amply, must always be flexible and stirred from the lived relationship with God; that is, they must adapt and be attentive to the faith (*fides qua*) of the mystical body, remaining humble and rather incomplete means to Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> Congar seems to believe strongly in these formulas, rites, and traditions as those which centralize the Christian message, but he recognizes that an overemphasis on these in the history of the Church has kept believers from having a genuine and meaningful encounter with Christ. If correctly ordered as ways to understanding and actualizing Christ’s message of salvation, rituals, traditions, and formulas can facilitate one’s relationship with God, but if they become detached from the spiritual lives of believers, they can end in themselves and not means of a deepening of believers’ relationships with God.

It is here that we find the fourth and final level at which the Church operates, according to Congar. He says that, “the Church bears her history, with its burdens that are sometimes a little suffocating, and also its scars and after-effects.”<sup>22</sup> Congar believes that history, despite that

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<sup>20</sup> Yves Congar, *This Church that I Love*, 99.

<sup>21</sup> Yves Congar, *This Church that I Love*, 99.

<sup>22</sup> Yves Congar, *This Church that I Love*, 99 One of these major scars for Congar, undoubtedly, was the division in the Christian tradition. For more information on his work and theology of ecumenism, see Yves Congar, *Ecumenism and the Future of the Church*, Chicago: Priory Press, 1967; Yves Congar, *Dialogue Between Christians*:

it can be, at times, damaging, is a necessary aspect of the institution of the Church, and the past, however challenging, has formed and continues to form the present. God's plan of salvation is truly realized in and through history. If we want to take this very traditional claim seriously, we must also remember and learn from the history of our tradition, which unfortunately can be sordid at times, as that which forms us and reminds us, even if through contrast experiences, God's stooping<sup>23</sup> to meet us in and through time and space.<sup>24</sup>

Of the four levels that Congar considers important for *This Church that I Love* which I find most important in influencing his understanding of the salvation of members of non-Christian religions, a third insight that pertains to our current discussion is Congar's ardent belief in the Church's role as missionary for the salvation of the world. Congar possesses a zeal for the conversion of the entire world. In *Christians Active in the World* he identifies two aspects of the Christian Church's participation in this mission. The first is, "to convert men [*sic*], to make them disciples; therefore evangelization" and the second is, "to guide the world towards God and to order it, as far as possible, according to God; therefore the temporal sphere, or civilization."<sup>25</sup> Congar intends for these two aspects to encourage the laity and to assure them of their active and necessary presence in the Church and the world. It is necessary to know that because Congar writes extensively on ecclesiology in the time before the Second Vatican Council, and the understanding of the Church articulated in the documents coming out of the council reflect many of his ecclesiological insights. He believes passionately that the world ought to be evangelized,

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Catholic Contributions to Ecumenism, Westminster: Newman Press, 1966; Douglas M Koskela, *Ecclesiality and Ecumenism: Yves Congar and the Road to Unity*, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008.

<sup>23</sup>Yves Congar, *Jesus Christ*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 34.

<sup>24</sup> In addition, it is possible that this statement reflects Congar's reaction against Neo-Scholasticism's ahistorical approach. History is necessary and although it can present challenges to us, denying its influence on us can lead to a disconnection between human experience and the divine.

<sup>25</sup> Yves Congar, *Christians Active in the World*, 71.

but not because he believes that non-Christians' lives are not holy in some way. Rather, he states, "Missionary activity cannot be considered merely as the act of bringing the light where previously was darkness: it cannot be reduced to a contribution which would consider men merely as *objects* of the missionary activity. Men are already religious subjects and must be treated as such." And further, "[Missionary activity] must aim to bring together the lights and the Truth, the graces and Grace, and to restore to the Church, as to its proper place, that which has been rough-hewn from her, outside her, but for her, in the last analysis."<sup>26</sup> Congar beautifully communicates his love for both the Church and the world. Christians ought not to see the world as a dichotomy between the sinfulness of the secular and the goodness of Christianity but be attentive to the goodness, truth, and beauty they encounter in the world around them. Congar's belief on the role of Christian mission demonstrates how he approaches his *via media*, understanding that the Christian Church possesses unique access to the knowledge and attainment of salvation precisely because of Christ's unique offer of universal salvation. However, the fact that the world also experiences and offers grace, although to a lesser extent than in the Church (as the historical body which seeks to actualize the mission of Christ), points to the fact that the world is not a dichotomy between right and wrong, good and evil, Christian and non-Christian, but a spectrum on which God reveals God's offer of salvation. Because Jesus Christ claims to be the Son of God, and is believed to have been raised from the dead, he, in union with the other two *hypostasis*, offers salvation to all of creation.

Congar clearly believes in the salvific efficacy of the Church. What he demonstrates here, however, is that although he will not waver on his insistence that the Church is the sociological body that makes present in history the living presence of the triune God, he

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<sup>26</sup> Yves Congar, *This Church that I Love*, 56-57.

recognizes that during all periods of time until the *Parousia*, truth is present in the world beyond the confines of the Church.

In Congar's beliefs about mission, we see hints of the fourth and final meaningful aspect of Congar's ecclesiology. Congar understood ecclesiology as inseparable from his beliefs about the human person. A recent Congar scholar, Elizabeth Groppe, provides strong evidence by her insistence that Congar's ecclesiology and anthropology are inseparable.<sup>27</sup> Because of the limited scope of this paper, I cannot provide an exhaustive discussion of Congar's understanding of the human person, but it is necessary to mention because its relation to ecclesiology helps us to better grasp Congar's larger understanding of those who participate in the Church. Both Congar's ecclesiology and anthropology are inspired, sustained, and made possible by the Holy Spirit.<sup>28</sup> In the following quote, Congar articulates the relationship between the Church and all human persons in the world.

The Church, like Jesus Christ, is a gift made by God to the world, to draw the world back to him. That is why the relations between the Church and the world are very different from those, for example, between a jewel and casket containing it, or between a prisoner and the walls of his cell. *The Church and world are two different entities, but they are united by a common end: with only this slight difference, that God is the ultimate end of the world, while he is the Church's specific and proper end...The Church has the mission, in and for the world, of procuring that order towards God in which salvation consists.*<sup>29</sup>

Congar is saying here that it is not only explicit Christian adherents who are ordered toward God, but all human persons. Therefore, all individuals are gifted with an innate ordering, in complete freedom, toward God. In making this statement, Congar exhibits a way in which his

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<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Groppe, *Yves Congar's Theology of the Holy Spirit*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Groppe, *Yves Congar's Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 85. We will discuss this point further in the following section on the Son and the Spirit in the economy of salvation. Although the Spirit's inspiration of the human person and the Church is not entirely unique to Congar, he insists upon this idea, and it is a significant concept in his *via media*.

<sup>29</sup> Yves Congar, *Christians Active in the World*, 70, Emphasis mine.

understanding of salvation is open to all people. Moreover, Congar believed that “The most important work today is to show the unity between theology and anthropology...[You] cannot separate God and man [*sic*].”<sup>30</sup> As Congar wrote more on pneumatology throughout his career, his thought grew and he wrote more extensively on the movement of the Holy Spirit in the world. This fourth and final point aids us in understanding Congar’s passion about the innate bond between God and every human person, no matter what religious tradition to which they adhere.

We have seen thus far that the Church, established by and always pointing towards Christ, comprised by the baptized, and through the movement of the Spirit, comprised by all human persons, makes up a mystical body, possesses a strong missionary spirit, and cannot be considered apart from anthropology. In order to more fully grasp these four ecclesiological concepts, it is necessary to turn to Yves Congar’s belief in the two hands of God, the Son and the Spirit.

### **Christology and Pneumatology: The Word and the Spirit Do God’s Work Together<sup>31</sup>**

We embark on a crucial area for Congar’s systematic theology and personal belief; the triune God’s activity in the world through the work of the Son and the Spirit. The following concepts found in Congar’s pneumatological and Christological insights are necessarily limited and have been chosen because they help elucidate the larger scope of Congar’s belief in the salvation of people of other religious traditions. These few comments about particular aspects of Congar’s thought are grounded in his belief that God is “God-for-us,” and that all the acts of the

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<sup>30</sup> Quotation taken from Elizabeth Groppe’s *Yves Congar’s Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 86 “Interview with Yves Congar” *America* 155 (6 May 1967): 677.

<sup>31</sup> Title taken from Congar’s chapter 3 heading in his book, *The Word and the Spirit* (London: Harper and Row, 1986), 21.

saving economy are free and gracious.”<sup>32</sup> Both the Spirit’s and the Son work for the salvation of creation in and through the unfolding of history. Congar’s elucidation of the singular mission of the Son and Spirit for the salvation of all of creation can be understood in the two following ways.

The first aspect of the person and action of Christ that directly pertains to our understanding of his belief in the salvation of those of other faith traditions is Congar’s conviction that the incarnation dramatically alters the world by restoring its original meaning. In his book, *Jesus Christ*, Congar says,

From the moment that God was hypostatically united to an individual human nature (*homo Christus Jesus*), (1 Tim 2:5), He was no longer God-for-the-world, He no longer exercised His sovereignty from and through His divine nature alone, but was so and did so from and through the humanity to which He was united in His person, a humanity which he ‘assumed for Himself.’<sup>33</sup>

Emphasizing the incarnation as that moment which dramatically changes all of temporal reality is an extremely significant Christological move. This quote highlights Christianity’s unique claim to salvation through a God who not only stoops to be in relation with humanity, but who actually becomes human in order to save. The importance of the incarnation lies precisely in the fact that Jesus Christ changed his very being in remaining one with the Father and also taking on human form in order to save the creation He loved. Because of this, humanity has not only a model to follow to live the life of salvation, but a changed human nature, gifting humans while on earth with the capacity to be in relation with God the Father and God the Spirit as Jesus the Son is in relation with them.

Congar’s focus on the incarnation also gives deep meaning to the presence of the Church, as a body of believers which has the ability to participate in the divine life before the end of

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<sup>32</sup> Congar, *Jesus Christ*, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Yves Congar *Jesus Christ*, 171.



time.<sup>34</sup> But more than providing new meaning for the Church, Congar's emphasis on the incarnation as one of his central Christological concepts posits a dramatic change in the way in which all of humanity exists. However, the incarnation, according to Congar, ought not to supersede the deep meaning found in all of Christ's actions, particularly in Christ's death and descent into hell. Thus, all people are loved by God and possess the capacity for salvation in and through the incarnation. However, those who believe in the saving power of Christ's life, passion, death, and resurrection are more aware of and more closely arrive at the particular Christian claim to salvation in and through faith in Christ, and in Christ, the triune God.

The second aspect of Congar's Christology which is particularly meaningful for this topic is his discussion of the meaning of the paschal mystery and the death of Christ on the cross. We find his reflections on the meaning that Christ's death on the cross has for the salvation of all of humanity not in his major Christological work, *Jesus Christ*, but in his book, *The Wide World my Parish*. In many of the chapters of *The Wide World my Parish*, Congar works out the meaning of salvation, and amidst this, discusses heaven and hell. In a chapter titled, "Hell Really Exists," he says, "Jesus went down 'into hell' full of love, and that is compatible with damnation...Jesus went into the very depths of death...not only bodily death, but that state of existence that no longer deserves to be called life. It is in this sense, to this depth, that Christ's resurrection is a rising from among the dead: Easter is the beginning of an integral salvation."<sup>35</sup> As a result, it is possible to draw from Congar that Christ's passion, death, and resurrection is an offering of salvation for all of creation, and yet there remains a particular claim to that salvation to those who explicitly believe in the salvific power of the paschal mystery.

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<sup>34</sup> The eschatological aspect of the Church is significant for Congar's ecclesiology. More information on this aspect of his thought can be found in Charles MacDonald, *Church and World in the Plan of God: Aspects of History and Eschatology in the Thought of Pere Yves Congar O.P.* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1982).

<sup>35</sup> Yves Congar, *The Wide World my Parish*, 71.

Congar, in addressing the Son's descent into hell, points to how this act enables the salvation of all humanity. Christ is raised from among the dead in hell, and makes possible each person's entry into complete and eternal union with God. Congar does not work out a theology of the cross, but by discussing it in his book about salvation, he raises awareness of his understanding of Christ's work to make salvation possible for all people.

As the title for this section suggests, Christ is not the only divine person who acts for the salvation of all persons. Congar speaks about the Spirit in two ways which demonstrate his active role in making possible salvation for all: the Spirit's dynamic action in the world, particularly as grace; and the Spirit as he who is the foundation and sustenance for ecclesiology and anthropology.

The Spirit lives and acts in the world in a dynamic fashion, tirelessly moving among us and encouraging us to be more deeply aware of and in communion with the triune God. Congar could not promote this idea more strongly when he says, "For the Spirit is the one who in secret gathers up and binds together everyone who is trying to stammer the words 'Our Father' in this world."<sup>36</sup> The Spirit is the triune person who is intimately tied to who we are as created beings, who we often neglect to pay attention and realize his closeness and his presence within our hearts. While it could seem that in the quote above, Congar is speaking to professed Christians, just a few sentences before, he says, "The Spirit is also active beyond the visible frontiers of the Church and, for the world, the Church is the sacrament of Christ and his Spirit. We include this great world in our prayer, interceding for it."<sup>37</sup> Congar defends the movement of the Holy Spirit in the world in and through his belief in the active work of both the Son and Spirit in the world perhaps theologically witnessed best theologically in the events of the incarnation and Pentecost.

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<sup>36</sup> Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, 127.

<sup>37</sup> Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, 127.

The entering of Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit as evidenced in scripture (Lk 2:6-7, Acts 2:1-21) does not say that the Son and Spirit are made present solely for baptized Christians, but for all. The Son and Spirit, because of the incarnation and particularly as witnessed in the event of Pentecost, actively work in the world for the salvation of each and every person. This leads us immediately into another important aspect of Congar's pneumatology that developed later on in his career.

As Congar continued to develop his theology into the 1970s and 1980s, he identified the terms pneumatological ecclesiology<sup>38</sup> and pneumatological anthropology.<sup>39</sup> The former describes the essential role that the Spirit plays in forming and sustaining the Christian Church;<sup>40</sup> the latter demonstrates, I argue, a development of the former insofar as it promotes the Spirit's activity of leading all human persons toward salvation. In both ecclesiology and anthropology, the Spirit acts as the Son acts, as an essential character in the life of both the Church and the world. Elizabeth Groppe believes that "Congar's insight into the need to develop and integrate these two dimensions of pneumatology is his distinctive contribution to a contemporary Roman Catholic theology of the Holy Spirit."<sup>41</sup> More than that, Congar's use of these terms deepen our understanding of the very meaningful way that the Son and the Spirit act in leading all people to salvation.<sup>42</sup> But the question remains, what is this salvation? What does it entail, particularly for

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<sup>38</sup> Appears in Congar's "Actualite d'une pneumatologie" *Proche orient Chretien* 2 (1973) 124.

<sup>39</sup> Taken from Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, 122.

<sup>40</sup> One the major ways that Congar discusses the role that the Spirit plays in the Church is through the liturgy. The following quote expresses his strong love for the liturgy and the deep mystery found therein: "One mission of the church is to gather together all truths scattered and dispersed and to offer all to God in a hymn of cosmic praise, voicing the doxology of those persons who do not have explicit knowledge of God and the praise of all speechless creatures. We offer all," Congar wrote, in "that sheaf that has been bound together invisibly by the Holy Spirit Elizabeth Groppe, *Yves Congar's Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 111. Congar quote taken from *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, vm. 2, p 223

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Groppe, *Yves Congar's Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 85.

<sup>42</sup> The Son and Holy Spirit are unified in acting to lead all to the path of salvation, but each do so uniquely. The Son acts explicitly in and through the sacraments, particularly in the Eucharist, but many forget that the Spirit is

people of other religious traditions? Now that I have broadened the scope of Congar's sources which demonstrate his belief in the goodness of the world in and outside the Church, as well as the movement of the Spirit and Son in all of humanity, I will now turn to the sources where he directly addresses this issue.

### **Congar on the Salvation of Adherents of Non-Christian Religions**

Yves Congar's theology of the salvation of people of other religions has not been a topic chosen by many scholars. Perhaps this is understandable because Congar did not write extensively on this topic. Nonetheless, he provided some important insights to the discussion. He considered the topic to be of growing importance, and as his theological career unfolded, he addressed it more frequently. In this final section, I hope to build upon the Christological, pneumatological, and ecclesiological ideas presented already, recognizing that these ideas significantly contribute to a balanced understanding of Congar's theology of the religions.<sup>43</sup>

Thomas O'Meara rightly claims that "familiarity with the history of this topic shows at once that this marginal but ancient teaching of Christian thinkers finds little new in either Congar or Rahner except gifted attempts to express a traditional teaching in modern language and ideas."<sup>44</sup>

This does not mean, however, that Congar's thoughts in this topic ought not to be investigated.

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also active when the sacraments are performed (evidenced perhaps by the fact that there have never been debates about the 'real presence' in the Eucharist). We cannot know entirely the variety of ways in which the Son and Spirit act in the world in directing people toward more intimate union with God, but in faith, we realize that their presence is active in the world. By mystery, however, I do not imply that Christians are not able to know more about the ways in which the Son and Spirit act in the world, but that the complexity and subtlety of the movement has not yet been fully described. For more information on the intimate ways in which the Son and Spirit act in the world, I recommend reading the many witnesses to personal experience of God found in the numerous writings by Christian mystics.

<sup>43</sup> I am deviating here, from the secondary literature on this topic. While others such as Thomas Raymond Potvin and Thomas O'Meara have contributed to this discussion by providing key ideas which synthesize Congar's articulation of these ideas, they are limited in their range of sources. For examples of secondary literature, see bibliography.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas O'Meara, "Theologian of Grace in a Wide World," in *Yves Congar: Theologian of the Church*. Gabriel Flynn, ed. Louvain: Peeters Press, 2005,

Congar's theological insights, which spanned half a century and strongly influenced the Second Vatican Council, have yet to be completely elucidated, and their meaning yet to exhausted.

One of the major faults of secondary literature on Yves Congar's belief in the salvation of adherents of non-Christian religions is the limited scope of their sources. In doing this, I believe that they limit their depiction of Congar and his actual beliefs on this topic. As I have already stated, Congar seeks to find a *via media*, between the two extremes, that of exclusive salvation of the explicitly faithful (i.e. sacramentally initiated) Christians, and the salvation of all regardless of personal belief or moral action. In working out his *via media*, Congar understands salvation as having at least four requirements; dependence on the Other, distinct Trinitarian quality, necessary moral action, and inclusivity.

The first of these four aspects, dependence on the Other, is perhaps the most important for Congar. Congar distinguishes among different religious traditions through the categories of either natural/mystical religions, or instituted/prophetic religions.<sup>45</sup> The former category is composed of religions that are made by human beings and is that which Congar allows in some non-Christian religions.<sup>46</sup> Congar does not find ultimate significance in religions that he understands to be constructed by humans because he holds a strong belief in the Christian faith as divinely inspired and incarnational. Congar therefore believes that a person ought to feel called to a religion not because of his or her own desires, but because God calls her or him into

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<sup>45</sup> Potvin, Thomas R. "Yves Congar on *Missio ad Gentes*," 142. Congar is among other theologians who have also made this distinction. For example, Karl Barth discusses his understanding of the differentiation between religions in Church Dogmatics, Volume 1. Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics, Vm. 1*. Geoffrey William Bormiley, and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. New York: Continuum International Publishing Company, 2004, 325-350.

<sup>46</sup> Potvin claims that Congar assigns this term to all non-Christian religions, but I take issue with this, as Potvin is referencing Congar's "Non-Christian Religions and Christianity," and on page 138 of this article, Congar says that among the natural or mystical religions are, "Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism." Congar finds in these religions a strong sense of being conceived of by the human mind, in contrast to the divine institution of Christianity, and here, I think Potvin too strongly states Congar's rejection of non-Christian religions. Congar only mentions three religions and Potvin claims that Congar assigns this title to all non-Christian religions.

deeper communion. God acts in and through the historical incarnation and the Spirit's action in the world, particularly in the Church. A person must demonstrate an openness to or a seeking of God, particularly the active presence of the Son and the Spirit in the form of the Mystical Body of Christ.

The first concept that is necessary to discovering Congar's understanding of the relationship between the Church and people of other religions is his brief historical review and contemporary meaning of the traditional axiom from the third century, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, or "There is no salvation outside the Church." In an article in *Sainte Eglise*, published in 1963, Congar notes that despite the many biblical allusions to the concept, the phrase was first coined by Saint Cyprian, and had the meaning in its original patristic context, "*en dehors de l'appartenance à cette institution de salut qu'est l'Église catholique et apostolique, il n'y a ni vie éternelle, ni salut.*"<sup>47</sup> In its original context, this phrase was addressed strictly to those who were already Christian and stated that Christianity's offer of salvation was limited to those who were within the institutional confines of (i.e. had been sacramentally initiated into) the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, one cannot be a Christian without being active in the ecclesial life of the Church. The meaning of this axiom changed significantly in the fourth century, especially due to the work of Augustine, who began to change, and at first, constrict the understanding of who ought to be considered as part of the Church.<sup>48</sup> The axiom continued to be

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<sup>47</sup>Outside the membership of this institution of salvation that is the Catholic and Apostolic Church, there is neither life eternal, nor salvation. Translation mine. "*hors de l'église, pas de salut*" in *Sainte Eglise*, Yves Congar 27. I think that "institution" in this sense means those who are initiated into the Church.

<sup>48</sup> According to Congar, Augustine's interpretation of this axiom considers an individual's morality as that which contributes to whether one is saved through the Church; Augustine distinguishes between being in the Church only in body, but not in spirit. Since this is the case, Augustine says, some people who will seem a part of the Church but will not be, and others that do not seem to be are, in fact, within it. This rather unclear theology of the Church is uncharacteristic for Augustine who was so adamant and articulate about other areas of theology such as original sin, and salvation through grace. "*Saint Augustin lui-même tempérait ses affirmations par la considération de l'attitude morale. Mais, de meme, si quelqu'un est dans l'Église catholique de corps seulement, et pas d'âme, les*

used through the scholastic period; its interpretation changed greatly in the modern period. Due to a shift in the interpretation of ecclesiology from the patristic notion of the *ecclesia* to the modern ecclesiology which was based primarily on Church as hierarchical institution, the phrase was used to promote the necessity of the juridical hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church as the primary requirement for salvation. Congar says:

*Dans la mesure où Ecclesia est plus pris pour l'institution de salut que pour l'ensemble des fidèles, la formule Extra Eccl. Est aussi une affirmation portant moins sur le salut de telle catégorie de personnes, que sur la légitimité et la nécessité de l'institution ecclésiale apostolique comme seule divinement mandate pour la salut des hommes.*<sup>49</sup>

This understanding of *Extra Ecclesia* is precisely what Congar reacts against, as he wants to retrieve the understanding of Church as *ecclesia*, or community of believers.

Congar concludes “*Hors de l’Église, pas de salut,*” with five ways that he sees the axiom operating in his contemporary context. First, he says that it prevents a leveling out (*latitudinaire*) of religions, that they are all of equal worth.<sup>50</sup> Second, Congar claims that his interpretation excludes the narrow (*étroite*) position, “*déterminer, par un critère extérieur, qui peut et qui ne peut pas être sauvé*”<sup>51</sup> Third, we understand the axiom to encourage a zeal for missionary activity, “by reason of God’s will of universal salvation, this affirmation must not lessen the insistence on the catholicity of the Church of Christ and of its action among all people.”<sup>52</sup> Fourth, Congar insists that “only effective membership of the visible unity of the Catholic Church assures the plenitude of means to salvation and sanctification.” Congar differs

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*sacraments ne lui profitent pas. C’est dans cette perspective qu’Augustin dit: certains semblent être dedans, qui sont en réalité dehors, tandis que d’autres semblent être dehors, qui sont en réalité dedans.”*

<sup>49</sup> Congar “*Hors de l’Église, pas de salut*” in *Sainte Église*,” 422.

<sup>50</sup> I will address this further below.

<sup>51</sup> ...determining, by an external criteria, who can and who cannot be saved. (429) Translation mine.

<sup>52</sup> “En raison de la volonté de salut universel en Dieu, cette affirmation doit entraîner une insistence non moins forte sur la catholicité de l’Église du Christ et de son action parmi les homes.” (translation mine.) 430

here in saying that effective membership promises the diverse means of salvation and sanctification, which differs greatly from the statement that the visible structure of the Church is the authority for determining who is saved. It is the believer's participation in the unity of the Church and not the juridical hierarchical structure which determines salvation. He goes on to say, however, that the minimal objective requirement is found in Paul's letter to the Hebrews, "believing in God causes salvation, and it must be accompanied by charity."<sup>53</sup> And in his fifth point, Congar discusses the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943) which was not favorable to the idea of two churches, that of invisible membership and that of visible membership.<sup>54</sup> However, Congar says, "having in [non-Catholics] the things which meet with their reality (*res*), they are, in various ways, in relationship with it, the encyclical expresses this relationship by the word ordinary (*ordinari*). It is saying that the realities of grace which are found in them tend to express themselves in the visible Body of Jesus Christ, all together *res et sacramentum* of salvation."<sup>55</sup> It is appropriate to begin this section with Congar's discussion of the historical development and contemporary meaning of *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* as this is one of the first places that Congar addresses the idea of salvation outside the Church. In addition, Congar's

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<sup>53</sup> The above quotation is my translation of the original, "Seule l'appartenance effective à l'unité visible de l'Église catholique assure la plénitude des moyens de salut et de sanctification" and "croire en Dieu rémunérateur. Pour que cette foi soit salutaire, elle doit être accompagnée de charité," 430.

<sup>54</sup> "L'encyclique ne serait guère favorable à l'idée d'appartenance invisible à l'Église visible." Translation mine. 431.

<sup>55</sup> Congar refers here to a Thomistic distinction in sacramental theology. Aquinas elucidates the meaning behind sacraments by naming a three-part structure. The first is the *sacramentum tantum*, or the sacrament only, which is the visible part of the sacrament, the physical object on which the sacramental reality takes place. The second part of this structure is what Aquinas calls the *res tantum*, or the reality alone. In this case, the *res tantum* is God's grace, the divine revelation which makes the object reveal God's communication with us. These two aspects come together to form the *sacramentum et res*, literally the sacrament and the reality. Relating to our present topic, non-Catholics, because of the incarnation, possess in their very nature (along with all of humanity) the reality of the image and likeness of God (*res*), and because they are not in sacramental communion, they do not possess the *sacramentum*, the physical mark or expression of the presence. "*Cependant, ayant en eux des choses qui relevant de sa res, ils ont un rapport avec lui; l'encyclique exprime ce rapport par le mot ordinary. C'est dire que les réalités de grâce qui se trouvent en eux tendent, de soi, à s'incorporer au Corps visible de Jésus-Christ, tout ensemble res et sacramentum du salut.*"



discussion helps the reader to understand Congar's conception of the Church, and how strongly people are dependent on it for salvation.

People are not dependent on the Church for salvation as an entity in and of itself, but as a social body inspired by the Holy Spirit and instituted by Christ. Congar is confident that the Church is established according to the divine will,<sup>56</sup> and it will be accomplished in its fullness at the *eschaton*.<sup>57</sup> Because at the *eschaton*, the second coming of Christ, the Church will meet the divine person who, in and through his divine relation to the Father and Spirit, initiated it and gave it meaning, it will have fulfilled its final purpose, to point toward and actualize his mission on earth. Hence, the Church, in its claim to knowledge in the meaning and goal for all of reality, is necessary for salvation “for the simple reason that it is the religion of Christ, not only founded by him but having Christ and his Holy Spirit as interior principle and, one could say, as substance.”<sup>58</sup> And so as the Church is founded on the activity of Christ and the Spirit in the entire world, outside the confines of the explicit operating of the Church, salvation is open to those outside of it. We see here one of the major aspects of Congar's understanding of salvation: men and women are saved through the power of the Son and Spirit acting in the world. In the context of Congar's writings on the salvation of non-Christians, his understanding at first seems to be limited exclusively to professed and believing Christians. However, Congar believes that both the Son and the Spirit are united in their pursuit of the salvation of all people, moving throughout the entire world, and not limited to only acting in the Christian Church, or the hearts of Christian believers. Congar, like the majority of other professed Christians, believes strongly

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<sup>56</sup> Yves Congar, “Non-Christian-religions and Christianity” *Evangelization, Dialogue, and Development: Selected Papers of the International Theological Conference*, M. Dhavamony, ed. (Nagpur: *Universita Gregoriana Editrice*, 1972), 142.

<sup>57</sup> Yves Congar, *The Wide World My Parish*, 113.

<sup>58</sup> Yves Congar, “Non-Christian Religions and Christianity,” 135.

in the power of the incarnation of the Son and sending of the Spirit. For him, to let go of these ideas would be to deny the power and divinity of the triune God. Because he speaks from a Christian perspective, however, does not necessarily lead him to believe in the damnation of people of other religions because he believes in the power of the incarnated Son and Holy Spirit acting, in various ways, often imperceptibly in the cosmos. Congar believes that the Spirit and Son work in the world for the salvation of all people; regarding the salvation of those of other religions specifically, the Spirit and the Son act in and through the individual lives of people.

It is necessary to distinguish, here, from salvation that comes through the Son and Spirit in the Church, and salvation of people who the Son and Spirit act upon, and through whom they are acting in aiding them to find salvation. Congar believes that salvation comes through participation in the Church because the Church points towards and actualizes Christ's universal claim to salvation. However, precisely because Congar emphasizes the incarnation and the paschal mystery as those acts of Jesus Christ's acts which dramatically change all of reality, and enable each human person to participate in eternal relationship with the triune God, he is opening up the possibility (and perhaps even stronger, the likelihood) of salvation outside of the Christian Church, however it is defined. Further evidence for Congar's openness to salvation outside of the Church is the action of the Spirit in the world, united with the Son's ever striving for the salvation of all. The Church, however it is defined, lays claim to the same mission of the Son and Spirit, and in so doing, is a more explicit way toward salvation.

Late in Yves Congar's theological career, he along with many other prominent theologians, contributed an article to a publication entitled *Evangelization, Dialogue, and Development* wherein he specifically addressed the salvation of non-Christians. One of the strongest arguments that Congar made in his conference paper is that salvation of those of non-

Christian religions does not come from the salvific nature of the (non-Christian) religion itself, but the hearts of the believers who are longing for truth, as the way in which salvation occurs in non-Christian religions. A positive appraisal of this understanding takes into account Congar's strong belief in the incarnation and the Spirit moving in the world, in the hearts of all people.<sup>59</sup> Looking at Congar's belief in the lack of salvific efficacy in other religions negatively, Congar does not promote non-Biblical religions (religions other than Islam and Judaism) as salvific because they "are not exempt from the influence of the 'Powers of the World.'"<sup>60</sup> They "contain many limitations both in their teachings and their practices, and yet give the impression of presenting the ultimate answer to humankind's quest for meaning, thus blocking, for all practical reasons, any openings the Gospel might otherwise have to the hearts of people;" and they "are not part of the Father's positive Project [*sic*] concerning humankind, whereas the Church is."<sup>61</sup> Potvin adequately summarizes Congar's rather strong critique of non-Biblical religions. We find here the way in which Congar understands his *via media*; he criticizes other religions precisely because of his insistence that the triune God, though the Church has a unique claim to salvation, but despite this, non-Christians can find salvation in and through the meaning they find in the non-Christian religions to which they choose to adhere.

Following Congar's thought pattern, we now understand that due to the Spirit and the Son acting in the world, salvation not only occurs in the Church, but outside the Church, not as a result of the salvific efficacy of other religions is equal to that of the Christian Church (especially

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<sup>59</sup> Yves Congar, "Non-Christian Religions and Christianity," 135 "It is Christ—the Wisdom of God, that is to say, the personal Totality of the plan of Providence, the substantial bond of everything which *is*, lives, tends to truth." And further, "The Spirit envelops everything, fills everything, penetrates and animates everything."

<sup>60</sup> While it is possible to argue that Christianity is not exempt from being influenced by the 'powers of the world,' Congar, in this statement, is rejecting some non-Christian religions as being conceived of and created by purely human motivations, and not, as he believes to be true in Christianity, divine motivation.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas R. Potvin, "Yves Congar on *Missio ad Gentes*," 144. Congar makes this bold claim because he believes that the Church follows through with the mission of Christ and the Spirit, although imperfectly, most effectively of any other religion, religion, sociological group, or individual human person on earth.

non-Biblical religions), but because of the movement of the Son and Spirit in each and every human person who longs for salvation and perhaps discovers aspects of truth in non-Christian religions. Congar realizes the power of historical and cultural contexts for leading a person toward a particular religion. And yet he relentlessly insists that salvation occurs in an extraordinary way in and through the active work of the Spirit and the Son in the imperfect social body of the Christian Church.

Further, Congar posits that the path of salvation occurs, or ought to occur in and through action. He says, “For a long time—perhaps for near enough three hundred years—the most tragic and pernicious thing about Christianity’s situation in the modern world has doubtless been the rift between the first and the second great commandment, between theology and anthropology—it is clearly contrary to the Gospel and to the whole Bible”<sup>62</sup> People find salvation in the “sacrament of neighbor,”<sup>63</sup> in acting for the Other. The ultimate Other, to which all selfless action ought to be oriented, according to the Dominican theologian, is the triune God, the one who offers the perfect example of relationality, and finding ultimate meaning and significance in being and acting for others. And it is indeed through the Church, the “Faith...[knowing] a living and active God, who reveals and communicates himself, who calls, demands, sends”<sup>64</sup> in which the sacrament for the Other should take place. However, Congar says that non-Christian religions, “have something to say to us. Nothing prevents us from recognizing the fruit of the graces of God and of the illuminations of the Spirit in what they propose of positive and true (even if it is mingled with inexactitudes and illusions)”<sup>65</sup> That which

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<sup>62</sup> Yves Congar, *The Wide World my Parish*, 37.

<sup>63</sup> Yves Congar, *The Wide World my Parish*, 124.

<sup>64</sup> Yves Congar, “Non-Christian Religions and Christianity” 145.

<sup>65</sup> Yves Congar, “Non-Christian Religions and Christianity” 138.

other religions have to contribute to the Christian faith are grace in and through truth, goodness, and beauty. These inexactitudes are insufficient for qualifying these religions offering salvation in and of themselves. His strong zeal for the Christian life, for the Church that he loves, and that which he knows to claim universal salvation cannot allow him to admit that other religions are salvific based on their doctrines. But inasmuch as people, prompted by a longing for and a seeking salvation in truth, good, or beauty, respond to the action of the Son and Holy Spirit, the adherents of these religions are open to the likelihood of their salvation. In continuing to believe that other faith traditions possess truth and deserve respect, and promote their adherents to act selflessly for the Other, and that the concept of living for the Other is given ultimate meaning by Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection, Congar believes that other religions can be an ordinary way of salvation. Precisely because Christianity, and the Christian Church is the direct extension of the activity of salvation offered by the "two hands of God," it is an extraordinary way of salvation.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, because these other religions are helpful for nurturing the goodness, truth, and beauty for which each person longs, adherents of these religions can be saved. Congar states, "it is then because the plan of God admits of the *de facto* usage by men of these religions for going to him that they can be characterized as 'Legitimate' (for these men [*sic*]; not in themselves)."<sup>67</sup> It is only as a result of the goodness of human persons, their longing for the transcendentals, and other religions' truth, goodness, and beauty enhanced by, or centered on Christianity's universal claim to salvation through the triune God that adherents of non-Christian religions can be saved.

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<sup>66</sup> Yves Congar, "Non-Christian Religions and Christianity" 140. Congar understands Christianity as the extraordinary way of salvation because of his understanding of the triune God as universally acting for salvation. Christianity, in this sense, is not simply another means to salvation alongside other religions' claims.

<sup>67</sup> Yves Congar, "Non-Christian Religions and Christianity" 141.

The question of salvation of people of non-Christian religions remains a difficult one. Many have sought to answer it, and yet no consensus has been reached. One of the major reasons for this is that the theological explanations for the Christian faith are tremendously diverse, which allows many theologians to take a wide range of positions on this issue. From the position which limits salvation as that which is given to those who have a personal belief in and relationship with the triune God to the claim that all religious traditions are equally as salvific, the contemporary theological arena continues to have a more profound sense of the largeness and diversity of religions, cultures, and perspectives in the world. And the problem is not likely to lessen in complexity in the near future.

Congar, who lived and died in the twentieth century, helped to set the groundwork for those who continue to address the question of salvation of those of non-Christian religions. In recognizing the issue's importance and helping to move the Roman Catholic position from an "extreme" position, which denies salvation to people outside the visible, historical Church, his reflections were significant for his time, and remain pertinent today. Congar believed that salvation occurred in and through the Son and Spirit working in the world, but did not confine this work to the sacramental or hierarchical Church. By doing so, he welcomed the idea of the salvation of people of non-Christian religions, not because of the salvific efficacy of the religions themselves, but because of the powerful saving activity of the Son and Spirit in the world, encouraging individuals to pursue truth, goodness, and beauty. Congar's voice is one of many trying to answer this question, and particularly in his insistence on a *via media*, he critically engages positive aspects of both extreme positions. In the twenty-first century, a time when the Christian faith is largely marginalized and privatized, Christians ought to continue to seek to reconcile faith in the triune God and the legitimacy of non-Christian religions and their adherents

in order to follow that which Congar admits at the end of his half-century of theologizing,  
“theology is too profound a mystery, but that is the direction in which I would like to go.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Lauret, Bernard. *Fifty Years of Catholic Theology: Conversations with Yves Congar*, 21.

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