

Is There An Evangelical Vision?

Reflections from an Italian perspective

*Pietro Bolognesi**

Istituto di Formazione e Documentazione Evangelica (IFED), Padova

SUMMARY

This paper argues that theological writing needs an agenda for it to have practical impact. Theology also needs to grasp a clear confession and to accentuate the transcendent. It needs as proclamation to risk confrontation. Evangelical

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel argumentiert, dass theologisches Arbeiten eines Programmes bedarf, um praktische Auswirkungen zu haben. Theologie braucht auch ein klares Bekenntnis und sollte das Transzendente betonen. Evangelikale Theologie muss sich im Bereich Ekklesiologie verbessern: alle Theo-

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RÉSUMÉ

La thèse de l'auteur est la suivante : la production écrite théologique a besoin de savoir où elle va pour avoir un impact pratique. La théologie a aussi besoin d'intégrer une confession claire et de mettre l'accent sur la transcendance. Comme proclamation, elle ne doit pas reculer devant le risque de la confrontation. La théologie évan-

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If it is difficult to reflect upon the path theology has followed up till now, it is even more problematic to reflect upon the vision theology must have. In a time of great changes it is, however, appropriate to think that theology needs to examine whether it has a specific goal and whether that goal can set specific priorities and characteristics. Such a task must take into account the limits and errors of the past but cannot expect to be itself exempt from mistakes. Evangelical theology, by definition, remains *theologia viatorum* with all the limits therein implied. This, however, should not inhibit reflection. It should, instead, promote it, but also act as a sober reminder to those involved in the

theology needs to do better at ecclesiology: all theology should be expressed with an awareness of the communal context. It will be testable both within the Church and in public sphere, 'in the marketplace', in matters of ethical debate and in witnessing to a hope which is not illusory.

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logie sollte unter der Wahrnehmung des Gemeinschaftskontextes ausgedrückt werden. Sie sollte sowohl innerhalb der Kirche als auch im öffentlichen Bereich nachprüfbar sein, „auf dem Marktplatz“, in Angelegenheiten ethischer Debatten und im Zeugnis für eine Hoffnung, die nicht illusionär ist.

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gélisme a besoin de faire des progrès en matière d'écclésiologie : toute théologie doit se formuler en fonction du contexte communautaire. Elle devrait être éprouvée à la fois dans l'Église et dans la sphère publique ou sur la place du marché, pour ce qui concerne les questions d'éthique, et pour rendre témoignage à une espérance qui n'est pas illusoire.

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task.

There is great difficulty when questions regarding the future viability of theology are raised. Are there categories with which a vision for the future of theology can be outlined? There is an exceedingly great amount of questions and unknowns. Theology is not immune to this complexity; to hide behind the difficulties of the task at hand, however, would be inappropriate. Modesty should not efface the challenge. The theological task must be fed by a vision, by an agenda well outlined and specific. Although no one can guarantee that these objectives will be successfully reached, the path can still be outlined.

1. Theology will need to be *confessing*

In a milieu more and more marked by the plurality of the existing options, and thus by the pressure that wants all religious experiences to be of equal value, the evangelical faith will need to keep a high grade of passion for the confession of its values and beliefs. The character of the Gospel itself promotes it. Theology will need to maintain its confessing characteristic independently of the context in which it will find itself, even though with the passing of time the stating character of theology tends to be watered down.

To be confessing means being able to say 'yes,' to place oneself on the great postmodern stage through convictions that can underline proposals and agreements. The confession (profession) of faith is a stating action, an action that defends its positions and does not hesitate to state them. Despite the complexity of communication, there is certainty about the One in whom one has believed and this is declared without fear. The evangelical faith is, first of all, a choice for the glory of God.

To chose, however, means also that some things need to be excluded. To be content with confessing one's faith in positive terms and being vague about the terms with which one is in disagreement, is insufficient. To simply air one's belief next to another is not enough. To affirm one's faith implies the commitment to state that from which one differs. Without this corollary, one runs the risk of simply consolidating the stance of accommodating all positions without any selection, with the exception of those positions which require exclusivity. Thus, to be confessing means being able of to say 'nay' as well. The confession of faith has always been a task of clarification, and as such it must continue.

The multitude of prospects seems to deter the univocal confession of faith, as plurality constrains confessing statements. But faith is the taking up one's position in a context of differing and contrasting statements. It is an alternative choice to the other options, affirmed in contrast with beliefs that have a different orientation.

It could be surmised that multiplicity is a specifically modern facet. To the careful observer, however, it is not so. Primitive Christianity developed in a strongly pluralistic context. The confession that Jesus is Lord was a confession that contrasted with other confessions. The same is true of the Reformation of the XVI century. It also represented a choice differing from the existing ones. Among the reasons for the failure of an Italian Reforma-

tion in 1500s, is certainly the difficulty of Italian evangelicals to rally around a unique confession of the Gospel. The doctrinal differences created uncertainty and prevented those seeking a message other than the Catholic one from hearing a voice that was truly univocal. The situation of today is, in certain ways, not unlike that of the 1500s, and as such it requires one to come to terms with it.

The theology of the future will need to treasure the experience gained from intercultural contexts, such as the New Testament one and the ones of the following periods. Thus, it will need to face these issues not as *ex novo* situations, but will need to build upon the existing historical heritage. To keep in mind tradition means to keep at bay the danger of misunderstandings and distortions. It means walking in the steps of a people, not merely following the path of an individual, regardless of the respectability of that person. Certain statements and assertions withstood the test of time, attesting to the strength of that message. It would be naïve to set forth ignoring such treasures.

To be confessing means to have an awareness of one's mandate. The evangelical faith never buckled easily under the dominant pressures, nor did it let itself be squeezed into the various molds which have successively been imposed upon it. Instead, it made a commitment before God. Even if the future will tend to require, as a condition for legitimization, a diminishing of the confessing character or a softening of all the sharp corners so as to make it more palatable to the world of knowledge, evangelical theology will need not to conform to such conditions. The modesty of presentation cannot ignore the strength of convictions.

Everywhere, signs of an attempt at re-conquering Europe can be felt: Islam, and its goal of Islamization on one hand, Roman Catholicism and its commitment to re-evangelize the continent on the other. These phenomena will not lessen with time but will rather increase even further. Despite this, and actually even thanks to it, one must make his commitment of faith a central part of his agenda. This profession must be simultaneously militant and culturally sensitive.

The spiritual void of our times is not merely weakness; it is pain caused by such a void. There is real pain, although well hidden. Man is broken and shattered. His sense of loss is real. We are witnessing a great crisis, as some values of the past have been swept away without new ones to replace them. On the horizon, a worrisome desert looms. Now, evangelical theology must dare to be confess-

ing. It must be confessing in a desert that, paradoxically, seems very uncomfortable when faced with any well-defined proposal.

Part of a full evangelical identity is the understanding of one's cultural context, both of its riches and its contradictions. This allows for clarity about what message needs to be presented. The situation in which one lives is not inconsequential, one needs to be rooted in that reality, without losing sight of one's vocation. A commitment to understanding the context where one is placed, a commitment characterized by risky creativity, must be set against the comforting apathy and laziness that push for contentment in repetition.

To further clarify, to be professing means to present a message that implies transcendence. To dare to keep the transcendent aspect of the message is not a given even in the evangelical milieu. Transcendence should be understood as the foundation of the hope shaped by revelation rather than simply as the bypassing of immanence or as the statement of human failure. It is an inalienable trait of the revealed God. God is truly God and cannot be confused with fake deities. In a world closed to all external interference, one needs to dare to announce God. Naturalism, subjectivism, and relativism don't swallow up God. He remains He Who Is. To him who knows Him, or better, who has been known by Him, it is happiness to be His witness in His world.

Preaching has always been a strong point of healthy evangelical theology. However, the question must be raised if it shouldn't be more strongly marked by the sense of who God is. The emphasis on the study and exposition of Scripture must go hand in hand with a renewed emphasis on the transcendence of Him who has spoken. The theologian is not the scientist who carefully and with detachment handles a vial; rather, he is a witness, deeply involved in the understanding of God's acting within him and in the world. It isn't a matter of discussing and approving of God's openness or immutability. Rather, it is a matter of knowing that evangelical theology is truly permeated by a sense of the Almighty.

To be professing means to have a *message that accepts the risk of confrontation*. To present and to defend are inseparable aspects. To be content with simply stating things isn't sufficient. There needs to be the capacity to dialogue, although it must be kept clearly in mind that the refusal of truth by a non believer has moral value and is not simply intellectual, thus one cannot hide behind the

machinery of traditional apologetics. There needs to be awareness of the depth of the conflict.

The opposition to the proclamation is, nowadays, more subtle and refined. The conflict has always been religious in nature, but today it appears more shaded and shifty, thus running the risk of being undetected. The hostility attacks the flanks now, no longer the front. Christianity appears as one among the possible voices, but the contrast is always of a transcendent nature.

Facing a religiosity made up of faded and washed out traits and ever growing tolerance, but also leery of any type of rigidity, evangelical theology must know whether it carries forth a well defined goal or whether it is a witness to a mere option. This means that it could even further marginalized in this so-called pluralistic society, but it also means that it will be able to enjoy a freedom and an independence truly unique in contrast to the dominant categories.

Theology will thus need to acquire a new sense of confrontation. The conflict will be, as previously stated, rather subtle and refined because it will lack the obvious signs of conflict. Christianity will be only one among the many voices but it will need to be ever ready to present the reasons for its hope and it will need to do so knowing the risks represented by the media. Hence, there will be a need to learn to dialogue in a 'secular' and 'profane' manner, free from the useless painful details imposed by tradition.

In its form, communication can be delicate but it also needs to be clear. The softness of the discourse should not mellow out the strength of its convictions. This presupposes full peace with the content of the confession and raises the question of the total assimilation of the message itself. An authentic appropriation can communicate well within the context in which it operates while being sufficiently creative.

The confessing commitment could be configured as 'secularized,' capable of imparting to the content of faith that cultural relevancy that so often is lacking today. A secularized confession is not a watering down of faith, not a subterfuge to compromise or eliminate the roots of faith itself. It is a means to show its relevancy. If compared with traditional confession, it can appear as risky and provocative, due to its proximity to the context itself. What matters is that it will not set aside the distinctives of authentic faith. Therefore, new forms of presentation can be thought of alongside the traditional ones.

2. Theology will need to be *communal*

True theology has always been also a communal task. Although it has been shaped by men of great calibre, it has never been marooned by individualistic categories. The theology of the future will need to cultivate with greater attention a vision for an *authentic communal life*. It needs to represent the narrative of the evangelical confession but with greater communitarian awareness. It will imply, thus, the translation and the embodiment of a life project that will need to be the most real and the most concrete possible, under the communal aspect as well.

The danger of the schism between theology and church is all too present to be set aside carelessly. The question of the true integration between the theological task and ecclesiastical reality arises. Some work at theology, some work at church life. On one side is Academia while on the other is the Pastorate. Scholars ride on one side while evangelists ride on the other. Such divisions are unacceptable. A true evangelical project cannot adapt to these divides and must categorically oppose them. These are not mere naïve simplifications, but true dichotomies and as such, they are incompatible with a true evangelical belief.

Theology has thus far been unable to clearly delineate a clear and evangelical Ecclesiology, but it needs to move in this direction. Although various attempts have been made, it cannot be said that something well outlined has been reached. The differing traditions have taken steps to get closer, but an evangelical ecclesiology is still to be reached. Evangelical theology seems rather stable as far as the major classical loci are concerned, but as for Ecclesiology and the doctrine of sacraments there does not seem to be a satisfying consensus. To the contrary, the differing church experiences seem to hinder the discussion, by imposing upon it unsatisfactory categories.

It is a work in progress, a work that requires research and reflection. Although for this locus it can be argued that a certain amount of diversity can only promote enrichment, there are common points that should be searched out and highlighted. The differences should not shadow unity, but such a common platform has not yet been outlined. The vision of the future needs to take into greater account the communal aspect as the place where theology happens. The confession of faith does not merely presuppose a people, but it regards that people. Although a number of evangelicals seem

to focus exclusively upon individuals, the Gospel elicits a communal dimension. Due to its nature, a theological work cannot subsist if it is oblivious to the ecclesiastical elements. Ecclesiology cannot merely be considered as a *locus* of intellectual gymnastics, but it needs to be a place of theological experimentation. A theology that cannot be road tested on the church pews is of little value. Many of the issues dealt with by theologians are distant light years from the ecclesiastical life. These issues seem to warm up the theology professionals but they completely bypass the people in the churches. Isn't this dissonance a cause for worry? Is it even allowable to practice theology while keeping the life of the church at arm's length?

The future needs a theology capable of intermingling with church life, a truly life-bearing intermingling. The story of evangelicalism is truly the story of a people, a people that crossed centuries and cultures, living up to its mandate. The true confession of faith took also place through the solitary sacrifice of extraordinary men of God, but the theology of the future needs to be interacting with faith experiences strongly communal in character.

As in the past, and maybe even more so nowadays, there is a thirst for a sense of community and this could be one of the greatest occasions for the Gospel. This means that the future pertains to confessing churches, churches that are able to shape and live culturally relevant experiences. The people of the covenant is made up of real witnesses, individuals who have cut their ties with the pseudo-communities in order to get together and live an alternative life project. Without this dimension, one risks compromising the evangelical message.

There needs to be a light of collective depth to offset the religion of compromise, the fog in the human heart, and the individualistic pulls. Only those who have undergone a real personal transformation will dare to say more. This is, under certain aspects, an unpopular and harsh way of talking, but it is also the only one worthy of being heard by a world stunned by too many words, too many inconsequential projects, and too many pseudo-communities. The evangelical community can take a leading role.

Individuals are not interested in knowing that the Gospel is true or that Christ is God: they wish to see signs of authenticity and the evangelical doctrine will need to express itself in daily lives. The credibility of the message is not only at stake on the existential level, but also on the communal level. It is certainly not only engaged on the rational or

speculative level. One does not wish to hear, but to see. This will help to unveil the hypocrisy in the churches and will force them to be less artificially defined. If experience cannot be considered as a source of theological work, it doesn't however mean that it is irrelevant to theological activity.

Depending on the context, either reflection or experience assume a certain noble aspect, but this is a polarization too naïve to be seriously. A true Christian vision cannot confer nobility to one rather than the other. One qualifies the other: *pietas* is an expression of *sapientia* and both find their origin in the work of God in men's lives.

The communal milieu can offer opportunities for an incisive testimony as well as providing to the care of the witnesses who need to live out that message. The danger lies in an increasingly refined work that fails to keep sufficiently at bay people's problems or their true and real pathologies. Thus, very sophisticated products are offered which are devoid of a true connection to the life of the people involved and devoid of real relations with the daily lives of churches and society. The idea of education itself will need to be rethought in terms of a true communal experience, one that will enable to pinpoint, correct, and heal problems and defects.

In this light, it is surely very appropriate to envision a greater ritual aspect in the believing community. A commitment to enrich even visibly the aspects of church life can help to concretize the position of the Christian community in the world. The church needs to learn to express itself through metaphors that convey a specific world-view.

Many evangelical groups would feel uncomfortable before such a hypothesis, because they would tend to set aside or undervalue the visible aspect. It is obvious that the Christian faith does not need the visible aspect in order to be considered tangible and concrete. Nevertheless, it does not mean that there needs to be an opposition of internal vs. external, invisible vs. visible, event vs. rite. The imaginary has its role in human history and to think of faith devoid of a visible and practical element means to encourage a dangerous truncated vision of it, a vision so indistinct that it cannot be seriously taken into account.

An imagery that values rituals is not in contrast to the spiritual element of faith. Rather, it supports it and enriches it, making its characteristic of wholeness more apparent. It is thus a spirituality of life and for life, a spirituality that, due to its authenticity, compacts all aspects of life without schisms or separations; personal piety and world

action, the spirit and the body, the mind and the heart. It is manifested in the tangible aspects of life, without being caught up in the dualism of 'spiritual' vs. 'material,' a dualism that wrecks havoc with reality and paralyzes action.

3. Theology will need to be *concrete*

An evangelical project that is theologically careful must not only be *confessing and communal* in nature, but will also need to make itself be heard in a real and concrete manner. A real confessing community aims at the reconciliation of all things in Christ. It is a renewed and innovative laboratory, overflowing with energy, freshness, and reality.

The dominant idea is that theology belongs to the speculative sphere. In the best hypothesis, it is thought at something internal to the believing community, something that benefits those who have had the privilege of being involved in a faith experience, but something really unrelated to the structures of life. It could answer a personal need, but nothing more.

This is not a healthy concept of theology, certainly not evangelical theology. Theology is *healthy doctrine* in the sense that it teaches how to live well in God's world. It is healthy because it concurs with the well being of man. Therefore, nothing can be more concrete than a theology aimed at honoring God in all aspects of existence. The emphasis placed upon contextualization, so often heard, must have a concrete result. What it means is putting into practice a real sensitivity pertaining to the meaning of Gospel on the concrete and public level. Some would use here the term holistic, which is acceptable as far as it is truly understandable.

The evangelical faith does not divide life into the sacred realm and the profane one, nor does it establish degrees of sacredness to things. It consecrates all things to the revealed God. God is not in feelings nor in reason, He is not present in any one part of man, regardless of how elevated that part may be. He is either present in all of man or not at all. The interaction with culture, which sometimes takes the shape of conflict, needs to take place on the whole spectrum.

To talk amongst a select group about the greatness of God and about his salvation, either in the cloisters of churches or in the living rooms and hallways of respectable people is not enough. Biblical salvation has a cosmic dimension and many evangelicals are guilty of not caring enough about the world in its entirety. Too easily are pulpit and

teaching desk, or praying room and workroom, separated and the world is left to handle its own affairs by itself.

For a long time now the use of Scripture in the ethical field has been subject of reflection and it is useful to continue to do so committing to this field. But the evangelical vision demands a translation of the biblical teaching. Since biblical teaching is not a mere theoretical discourse that sets forth criteria, but is a discourse that takes the responsibility of declaring itself, we need to dare to move forth. Not only move forth, but to go beyond. To be credible, it must be concrete in its statements pertaining to the issues that trouble the existence of contemporary human beings. Thus, real strides can be made despite all the risks involved in such an action.

Theological action implies, then, a *specific presence on the public marketplace*. Many are the voices broadcasting the discomfort felt by our society. Sociology speaks about it, so do psychology and human sciences in general. But it seems that theology is not human, as it does not make its voice heard. This cannot be simply blamed upon the indifference of the media towards the evangelical positions; rather, it should be imputed to the inability of these positions to make themselves heard on the public place. Evangelical theology, however, must cultivate the ambition of being heard and being present in the public square. 'Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands afar off; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking...' (Is 59:14-15 ESV).

The silence or the absence of evangelical theology in the marketplace implies a series of consequences. The first is at the ethical level. One is left with the idea that the evangelical vision is practically identical to other world visions. Regarding bioethical issues and the use of technologies, it would seem that the evangelical position coincides more or less with that of Roman Catholicism. Is such a vision sufficient? Is it possible that differing theologies simply result in a similar ethic? Do evangelicals need to award to the Catholics the field of ethics? Isn't this a serious question for evangelical theology? Either theology is considered as separable from ethics and thus allowing for the thought that even starting from a different theological system there can be, as a result, a set of ethical beliefs that are basically the same. Or, theology is considered joined to ethics, thus causing people to question of certain *de facto* juxtapositions. The problem does

not lay in the possibility that one's ethical system might converge with or be juxtaposed to this or that other system, but it lies in the accepting such convergences without questioning their legitimacy. It is an error to believe that the specifics of evangelical ethics lie in some general allusion to the deity or to a few biblical references. It seems that one needs to be content with setting the record straight on this or that detail, while leaving unevaluated the whole thought structure behind it.

The silence of evangelical theology also runs the risk of producing a detachment between theology and ethics. It seems that aside from major postulations, sufficient thought is not allotted to these themes. It seems that thought, reflection, and the formulation of goals are rather lacking, particularly in the fields where a systematic approach is necessary. It seems that there is a great difficulty in formulating any postulation that goes beyond the mere personal level. On issues such as bioethics, economics, globalization, the environment, the formulation seems unable to go beyond the level of good personal advice. On a systematic level, simply carrying on the Catholic positions seems to content us. Should we be satisfied with this stance or should we aspire to more?

Maybe one should ask whether it is more strategic to be a presence rather than to operate at a tangent to the ethical, social, and political fields; whether visibility should be preferable to infiltration. These methodologies can have very relevant side effects and thus require careful evaluation. Besides questions of a strategic nature, one needs to examine whether there is a specific evangelical proposal to make or whether it is no different from the other existing ones.

Europe is experiencing great labour-pains pertaining to the building of its political structure and this is not a small matter. It is hard to ignore the precarious and temporary character of one's convictions on such complicated matters. On these issues, we need to evaluate and ask ourselves if it is acceptable to simply feel ill at ease with similar partnerships and juxtapositions, if it is sufficient to warn about some dangers or if we shouldn't aspire to reflection that leads to concrete formulations. If evangelical faith is a choice over all areas of life, it should be difficult to set aside this commitment to seek concrete proposals even in these areas.

Our times are greatly intolerant of any ethical imposition, but the future cannot be thought of without particular reflection in this field. Evangelical ethics cannot be content with the simple role

of being a descriptive discipline. It needs to offer arguments that explain and motivate the specific vision it has received; it needs to be very involved in offering concrete solutions.

The evangelical silence, manifested in the lack of concrete proposals for matters of public interest, in the end, lends legitimacy to the State as legislator in all fields. The State presents its agenda on all issues without ever, or hardly ever, encountering the evangelical thought. It seems that the latter does not own goals of its own and is content with generic references to the Judeo-Christian elements in the reality at hand. Only when certain misapplications are quite obvious, then a little shudder of displeasure is felt, but in the great majority of cases, the State is left to legislate without having to worry about proactive interventions.

Ancient paganism gave the State the right to legislate on all aspects of life. The State then took the right to define right from wrong. But Primitive Christianity overcame paganism, rejecting specifically Caesar's demands upon the individual, the church, education, and family, and proclaiming the right of God to the whole of reality.

Today, it is obvious that, in order to shape a new society where atheists, agnostics, Catholics and Evangelicals can live together, the State can only push the individual citizen to keep his religious creed within the confines of his private life. The State is in charge six days a week, while the Churches take care of the remaining one. This should lessen the conflicts and should promote coexistence for extremely heterogeneous groups of people. From the viewpoint of evangelical theology, it is hard to support the success of such an undertaking.

The question is not whether the State should or should not move along these lines. The question is whether evangelical theology pursues a goal in this field. From an evangelical point of view, to be content with a passive resistance or to intervene only when the big choices have already been made seems unacceptable.

Evangelical theology must be present in the public marketplace, to give its contribution to the redrawing of the city map. To merely chit-chat about the world reality as it is does not make much sense. To dare to have a vision is possible. It is not just a wish for conquest; it is the awareness of being the bearers of a unique specificity. To be evangelical means that it cannot be otherwise and that the Gospel cannot be cheapened.

A true theology pursues a vision of true hope. It

isn't moving onward in the direction of an undefined and fading breath; it is owning a hope based on a true foundation. The evangelical commitment is not satisfied by ephemeral projections. It is fed by the past and it is aware that each time the Gospel is preached, lived, and offered, the Holy Spirit can use it to operate a change.

Today, there is a crisis of values, of knowledge, and of hope. The early Christians used to greet each other saying *Maranatha*. It was a way of stating the essentials of the faith. Centered on Christ and His promise, everything finds again the assurance of hope. Christians were called to 'give... a reason for the hope' (1 Pet 3:15). They had a vision that went well beyond their supposed strength.

There is a need to re-centre around the essential, 'looking unto Jesus' (Heb 12:2) today too. There is a need to proclaim the only hope. A modest style does not prevent a certain boldness. We are not speaking about a lofty task, nor a mere recitation of a thought that is short of arguments. It is a project worth living and resurrecting for. This is man's only worthwhile existence. It can be lived in humility but also in the assurance that is for today and for eternity.

A rootless theology, non-specific, and devoid of vision, is useless. There is no need for a camouflaged theology, which blends in with weightless academic endeavors that carry no weight with society. In the presence of globalization, with its taste of Babel, evangelical theology cannot be satisfied with platitudes about love, tolerance and spirituality. Either it will rediscover in the Gospel's uniqueness the heaven that can be brought forth as truly universal, or it will not have anything to offer.

Notes

1 ifed@libero.it.

I wish to thank Joel Rinn for helping to prepare this paper for publication.