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Conversion and Salvation

in Interreligious Dialogue

There can be many points of contact among people of faith: from the one Creator, through the aspiration to Transcendence, spiritual resources, up until the practices of fasting, almsgiving, worship and prayer, meditation and pilgrimage. The most controversial issues, though, are questions of Truth, theological basis, mission, and conversion and salvation.

GOD'S UNIVERSAL PLAN OF SALVATION

God permanently wants and aims to challenge and change our attitude (in constant conversion) towards other people and other faith communities as well. Let us first see some concrete examples from the Bible.

Psalms 24 affirms: "The world and all that is in it belong to the Lord; the Earth and all who live on it are God's." Amos (9,7) is a clear articulation of God's universal plan of salvation: "People of Israel, I think as much of the people of Sudan as I do of you. I brought the Philistines from Crete and the Syrians from Kir, just as I brought you from Egypt."

Isaiah (19,19-21) speaks about the Egyptians as also subjects of God's self-revelation: "The Lord will reveal Godself to the Egyptian people and they will acknowledge and worship God and bring sacrifices and offerings."

In the following verses (23-25), the empires of Egypt and Assyria are at the same level as Israel: "Israel will rank with Egypt and Assyria, and these three nations will be a blessing to all the world."

In another place in his book (45,1), the prophet Isaiah refers to King Cyrus of the global empire of Assyria as the Messiah: "The Lord has chosen Cyrus to be King! God has appointed him to conquer nations."

A peculiarity of the prophet Jonah is that throughout the whole book of his story, God deals with the people of the city of Nineveh with a profound compassion and empathy, since they are also people of God.

The prophet Malachi (1,9-10) summarises: "People from one end of the world to the other honour me. Everywhere they burn incense to me and offer acceptable sacrifices. All of them honour me."

This is another, less emphasized tradition in Biblical thinking. In this God cares for all communities of faith, reveals Godself to them, accepts their offerings and sacrifices, appoints them to be blessings to the entire world, and deals with them with profound compassion.

Therefore we, too, are called to radically change our attitudes towards our sisters and brothers of living faiths anywhere in the world, and to reinterpret the meaning of conversion and salvation in our theology and spirituality.



THEOLOGY OF DIALOGUE

Since an inhospitable theology cannot produce hospitable people, the development of the theology of dialogue has been marked by a shift from theological hostility first to neutrality, and then to hospitality.

The theology of dialogue is the rediscovery of humankind's original and fundamental interconnectedness. It also utilizes the processes of indigenization, inculturation and contextualization. The mentality of dialogue is complementarity, mutual correction and relationality: not "superior-than" but "in-relation-to."

The theology of dialogue culminates at and embodies a shift from an exclusivist salvation history (Heilsgeschichte) and the negative and trivial evaluation of other religions towards the oikonomia (economy) of Christ.

It has also rediscovered and revitalized ancient theories and theologies, such as the originally Stoic concept of the seeds of the word (*logoi spermatikoi*) present as well in other religious traditions; the pre-existent Logos or the Cosmic Christ, having always been in dialogue with the world.

In the ecclesiology of dialogue, descriptions and Biblical images such as the provisional sign, the leaven, the salt, the light, and the servant dominate. All of these images are summarized in the symbol of the Church as the prefiguration and foretaste of the Reign of God.

This symbol means that God in Jesus Christ has entered into relationship with persons of all kinds of faiths and of different ages. God offered a community of forgiveness, reconciliation and new creation, of which the one Church is an effective sign and symbol.

SALVIFIC VALUE OF RELIGIONS

Apart from the exclusivist model of the theology of religions, there are other Christian responses to the interreligious challenge, most of all the inclusivist and pluralist models, both still in their formative periods.

Consequently, there is a shift in theory and rhetorics from the old military vocabulary of conquest in mission towards other poetic expressions of the role of Jesus Christ and the Church in the history of salvation: for example, adaptation, fulfilment and sacramental significance.

Similarly, concerning the difficult question of the salvific value of other world religions, there have been five main modern paradigms elaborated so far in Christian theological thinking: opposition, fulfilment, independence, pluralism and complementarity.

Some say that the Truth in Christianity is irreconcilably and diametrically opposed to other religions' truths. Others maintain that Christianity is the threefold fulfilment of

other religions, theologically, anthropologically and Christologically.

Again others are of the opinion that other religions are independent and parallel ways of salvation. Finally, others speak about the validity of religious pluralism in the theological realm as well.

The Jesuit monk, Aloysius PRERIS SI even sees the (Western and Middle Eastern) Semitic culture and the (Eastern Asian) Hindu-Buddhist-Taoist culture as two impulses or instincts of spiritual and religious tradition, which are dialectically complementary and mutually corrective.

According to his understanding, we are mutually called and challenged to rediscover and recompose the unity of the human family around the common soteriological root present in all religions.

INCLUSION IN THE MAINSTREAM OF SALVATION

Based on the exclusivist paradigm, the method and attitude used for centuries has been that we first break down the story of other religions and present our story, and then, having given them a new analysis, we present Jesus Christ as the solution.

Indeed, we should affirm that the redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ is all-inclusive. This work continues still today everywhere in the world. In the ongoing work of Jesus Christ today, bringing healing and also wholeness to broken humanity, we are all called to be humble participants.

We all know that Christ is the answer—but what is really the question? We ourselves should be in constant dialogue with Jesus Christ. He has never said of anyone that she or he has already reached the Reign of God. According to the Scriptures, there was only one single person of whom He said that he is not far away; and another one, whom Jesus promised would be there soon.

The Jesuit monk, Yves RAGUIN SI warns us that although we have Christ, and we have God's revelation, the search is still painful because we are not sure that the Christ we figure out is the real Christ. The challenge in this respect is to be able to genuinely and profoundly express the Christian experience within other conceptual frameworks.

S. Wesley ARIARAJAH summarises this line of thought: "Dialogue cannot take place in a true spirit of discernment if the parties involved exclude each other's history from the mainstream of the salvation that God offers to all people."

THE SPIRIT BLOWS WHERE SHE WILLS

The *Guidelines on Dialogue* (1979) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) rightly affirm that God is in fact at work everywhere: "God the Holy Spirit has been at work in the life and traditions of peoples of living faiths."

The main characteristics of the Holy Spirit are Her total and absolute freedom and boundlessness and Her active capability of creating new relationships and new communities. "The Spirit blows where She wills." (John 3,8)

In building up new and prolific communities, dialogue can become a mood, a spirit, an attitude, a mentality, a habit, a new lifestyle, and ultimately a way of expressing our mutual neighbourliness.

Through dialogue we can pool human values like justice, peace, justpeace, compassion, empathy, truth and righteousness. With the help of dialogue, we can assist in bearing our resources as world religions to each other's improvement.

The new communities or communions (koinonia) of dialogue are recognizable from their fruits and consequences (according to Galatians 5,22): love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The marks of the Spirit are life, order and community. The parable of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25,31-46) clarifies the question of whether only the persons who know the name of Jesus can be called righteous, or other people as well.

Let us always keep in mind also the distinguished "pagans" from the Bible with recognized values: Melchizedek, Cyrus, Naaman, Ruth, Rahab, the Queen of Sheba, the woman of Samaria and the woman of Cana, the Good Samaritan, the Roman Centurion and the Greek poets.

These actors in narratives and parables can be of great help for us when we try to understand how the Holy Spirit keeps working among those who have no explicit consciousness of serving the Lord.

The Truth, in the end, is also a veiled and hidden mystery, into which the Holy Spirit will surely lead us. This firm notion of ours is based on John 16,15: "when the Spirit of truth comes, She will guide you into all truth."

CREATIVE TENSION: DIALOGUE AND MISSION

We should constantly call each other to conversion, a radical change of direction in our lives. A fruitful debate in the ecumenical movement concerns the loss of urgency of the missionary mandate and vocation when being engaged sincerely and committedly into dialogue. Indeed, the dialectics of dialogue and mission keep the whole interreligious encounter moving.

The frequent double language of Christianity is at the same time an engine or fuel, but also a threat to our socio-political credibility. Our partners often seriously question our real intentions and our genuine commitment to dialogue.

The vibrant electricity of this pregnant theological double language is felt in official documents as well. The *Vancouver Report* (1985) of the WCC keeps in creative tension these theological core points:

"While affirming the uniqueness of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus to which we bear witness, we recognize God's creative work in the seeking for religious truth among people of other faiths."

Similarly, the *San Antonio Report* (1989) of the WCC speaks in the following way: "We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God."

Both of these statements start with a strong affirmation of the traditional mission theory and of the classical theology, and then they introduce the contemporary dialogue paradigm, affirming both in their specific places.

CONVERSION TO GOD-CENTEREDNESS

A useful mirror for ourselves is provided when we face the question: If there are *revival* movements in other religions, what is our approach to them? If we neglect them or if we remain indifferent, they have to fight on three fronts.

From the side of their own fundamentalism, they are charged with compromise, unbelief and opportunism. From the side of secularism their revival similarly is regarded as unscientific superstition which is unnecessary and invalid.

Finally, from the part of other religions they too are rejected as followers of false belief systems, and there is a lack of willingness to see in them the vitality and present worth of their religion.

There is a strong need to re-evaluate and to rethink our whole Christian understanding of conversion (*metanoia*) in this respect. In the contemporary world, instead of being first of all a vertical movement towards God and a genuine renewal of life, conversion has falsely started to be understood as a horizontal movement of individuals or groups of people from one community to another.

In spite of this, a genuine role of religion is to draw attention to the transcendent centre, the ultimate mystery, the Truth of the truths, which is the source of all values and also the criterion to judge all human efforts.

We have to search for ways of liberation from "I"-consciousness, and for an interiorized relationship with the Transcendent Reality. Therefore, it would be important to emphasize conversion as the movement from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness—or, more precisely, to God-centeredness.



Eva VALVO

European Identity and Interreligious Dialogue

At a time when European or national identities are being questioned and challenged by the growing or lasting presence of migrants, religion is more and more often mentioned as a key element in this context.

In the first part of my article I will define some general concepts regarding identity and the perception of the "Other" in Europe, while in the second part I will specifically focus on the religious implications of the debate about European identity.

EUROPEAN IDENTITY?

Definitions of our identity may be related to different aspects of our lives, eg. occupation or role, political or religious belief, national or local background, belonging to a minority or a majority group, gender and sexuality, language, education, or even what we are not.

The list could be much longer, but even then it would never be complete. One's identity is not only defined by one's own perception, but also by others' perception. Identity is many-sided and complex.

Some would put it: we have several levels of identity, like onions where each layer contains another one. But I would rather put it this way: identity is made of overlapping circles, where different or even contradictory elements can cohabit.

The conception of individual identity can also be applied to collective identity, such as the European one. If a single person cannot be defined by just one label, still less can be the continent of Europe, where several peoples, cultures, languages and religions live together.

In fact, some scholars talk of a multiple identity of Europe, but this concept should be a starting point rather than the end of the analysis. The concept of multiple iden-

Suggested Reading

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ty would imply tolerance and potential richness only in a perfect world.

Since we are not living in such an ideal place, though, we have to keep in mind that cultural differences are never neutral, but are subject to power relationships and often result in prejudice and fear, discrimination and oppression.

Throughout the history of the building of a united Europe — starting from the institution of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, up through the Enlargement by ten new countries in 2004 — uncertainty about a specific European identity has increased.

What is Europe? What does being European mean? It is difficult to define Europe on both the historical and geographical levels, especially regarding its Eastern borders. A part of Europe has become a single political entity only in recent times, but the concept of Europe is much older.

It can be tracked down to the conquest of America, when European powers started to "discover" and conquer extra-European peoples, thus becoming a political and cultural entity, not only a geographical one.

During the XVIIIth century the *Enlightenment* movement linked the idea of Europe with the concepts of liberty, progress and rights. In the same period, though, our continent exploited other countries through slave trade and colonialism. It is important to keep in mind this kind of contradictions while discussing European identity.

Europe defined itself as the centre of the world, as the only promoter of progress and civilisation, thus defining other cultures as primitive and inferior or fallen. Another contradiction is that the values promoted were claimed to be at the same time both universal and specifically European.

