

SUPPLEMENTARY ARTICLES AND NOTES

Dialogue in Crisis

The Roman *Nostra Aetate* Congress 2015
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Among the many events that have recently commemorated the golden jubilee of *Nostra Aetate*, one requires some documentation and evaluation here: the interreligious congress co-sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews at the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, and the Gregorian University. 524 participants had registered. The audience was expectably colourful. The thematic structure of the three days reflected the Church's breakthrough to interreligious dialogue: first, commemoration, then, present problems, and finally: future generations.

NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT?

During the first meeting, the organisers showed a 40-minute video, which they had specifically commissioned for the occasion: *Nostra Aetate, The Leaven of Good*, Part III (what part I and II were about remained unclear). The video, now also available through the PCID, is a sequence of more than 40 short statements on the Conciliar Declaration. Leaders and experts, Catholic and other, share what interreligious dialogue means to them and to the world of today. The Italian theologian Dr. Maria De Giorgi, M.M.X., who works for Buddhist-Christian understanding at Shinmeizan centre, Japan, explains dialogue as the spiritual art of sustaining relationships. The Vicar to the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem in charge of Hebrew language Catholics, Fr. David Neuhaus, S.J., speaks from his experience as Christians between Jews and Muslims. Recalling John XXIII's

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request to throw open the windows he says: "It is suffocating here; if we do not engage in dialogue, we will die." The former archbishop of Canterbury and initiator of the Muslim-Christian dialogue process "Building Bridges," Rowan Williams, calls to mind that dialogue is not a negotiated settlement; it is: listening to the other. Varasami, a young Buddhist monk and 2014 "Nostra Aetate scholar"—staying at the "Catholic Lay Centre" and studying at the Pontifical Universities—sums up his Roman experience of religious plurality with the words: "We are not the same: we are different"; but precisely therefore, he says, he wants to transmit, when returning to his home country Myanmar, the importance of interreligious dialogue to the next generation. The series of statements ends with Pope Francis' invitation to representatives of various religions at Ground Zero to pray, in silence, for peace.

ABUSING KNOWLEDGE AND RELIGION

The congress venue was the Gregorian University. Palpably, there was a *Gregoriana* influence on the layout of the second day. It started with lectures by two professors of the hosting university. Bruna Costacurta, an Old Testament scholar, sketched out what the Hebrew Bible has to say on dialogue. Fr. Paul Gilbert, S.J., a Belgian philosopher, analysed the mechanisms at work in a "*strumentalizzazione*" of religion, that is, in its subordination to human purposes.

Gilbert's lecture offered helpful historical background and reflective categories. Let us, however, also enter into discussion with his proposal. The speaker had, no doubt, a point when unveiling the usage of religious motifs to justify societal segregations and violent actions: a sadly topical issue. Still, I do not fully share Gilbert's assumption. He claimed that knowledge loses its purity and liberty when applied technically. By analogy with that—seemingly Heideggerian—view he wanted to unmask usage of religion. My question is whether the 'technology people' do not, often, ask questions to the 'knowledge people' that inspire them to new clarifications and discoveries. Isn't there a dialogue even here? So I agree with Gilbert in revealing the "technocratic paradigm": a valuable category when examining abuse patterns, proposed by Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'* (n. 108). However, religion is not then at its heart when it remains untouched by the needs, questions, the insights and cries of today's humanity. Religion is at its heart when it rediscovers itself as "other-sensitivity," as I would call it. Thus, religion will also be in listening contact, in learning dialogue with other proponents of knowledge; and thus religion will likewise sense where it is drawn away from its fundamental structure, viz., sensibility towards the other person, the world, the spiritual—sensibility for God.

So the dividing line is not simply between “using” and “not using” religion; that would still leave open what religion is. The difference is, rather, between religion as possession of knowledge, self-referential system, production of closed-in identities—and religion as sensitivity for the other.

VIOLENCE AND DIALOGUE

So, the study day started with demanding lectures by the philosopher and the Old Testament scholar: a felicitous idea; but it meant speaking on dialogue rather than in dialogue. Neither did the two disciplines interact and enlighten each other; nor were scholars invited to present grounding considerations on dialogue from other religious traditions.

The rest of the morning focused on a specific theme, viz., religion and violence. The first panel was marked by a scandal. An African priest, involved in official Muslim-Christian dialogue, shared sad experiences from a group visit to the Holy Land and subsequently put this question to the Jewish speaker, Rabbi Dr. David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee: Would life not be easier if the Jews had become Christians? In a context of good-humoured equality where people know each other well and share a culture of both confrontation and communion, such a contribution might be understood as robust fraternal provocation; but here, it could be understood differently: a Christian representative negating the legitimate existence of Judaism? The question came from a Catholic priest in a Catholic place and was directed towards a Jewish guest; and the moderator did not interfere. The Rabbi, however, responded intelligently, soberly and elegantly: Your statement shows, Father, that even the Catholic Church itself, which was able to produce *Nostra Aetate* 50 years ago, is today still in need of fully absorbing the Declaration.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND PLURALISM

The afternoon saw two other concretely themed panels, this time on religious freedom. At least two talks deserve a summary here. Fr. Christian Rutishauser, S.J., superior of the Swiss province and an expert in modern Jewish thought, identified what he called “challenges,” in fact, sore spots of on-going dialogue processes. His method of discerning was to provide distinctions. What is, for people of religion, the ideal socio-political model, if we see a growth of both secularity and religious radicalisation? Rutishauser’s formula was “*Dignitatis Humanae* presupposes *Dei Verbum*.” In spite of his allusion to the two Catholic documents, his vision of religion and secularity can be understood, and indeed

shared, by other religious traditions: the Catholic project is, said Rutishauser, to advocate religious freedom because revelation is God's personal self-communication. Revelation is, therefore, to be received in personal openness, free of coercion. Not even religions must exert pressure, let alone violence, to impose what they have come to discover as the truth. That is why religions should – while obviously rejecting secularism – support processes of secularisation. They liberate human beings also to become active recipients of revelation: to become believers. Atheists, on the other hand, should not see interreligious dialogues as events they can skip: secularism as assumption, narrative and societal model is strikingly similar to faith traditions – it is a civil religion. Therefore, atheists should participate in the public dialogues in which religions engage.

In order to understand fundamentalist tendencies better, Rutishauser reminded the audience that fundamentalism grows where people feel they lost their *fundamentum*. He further pointed out that fundamentalism does not only violate the outsiders: a fundamentalist religion also hurts its own people; therefore, growth of transparency and participation *ad intra* are a good indication of a religion's health, and a means against radicalisation.

Rutishauser's final theme was theology of religions. Which approach supports religious freedom? Not the pluralistic model, he said. I think he is right in this, because a society which agrees that all religions are equally paths to salvation will have little understanding for those who hold their own religion to be the only true and who try to convert others. Rutishauser favoured, instead of a pluralistic approach, "a description of pluralism from a faith perspective." The open question is, he said, the relation between mission and dialogue.

There is, indeed, a tension, between mission and dialogue; but they get in the way of each other only if mission is understood in a reductive manner as "I have to convert the other" and dialogue as "I have to leave out my truth convictions." Other conceptions can be offered, which are in fact more faithful to Church tradition: dialogue is the humble listening to the other in search of an ever better understanding of truth. Mission, in turn, is accepting Christ's mandate and style to transform the face of the earth in the sense of the Gospel. Therefore it is acting in the hope that—perhaps through our witness—others would accept baptism; but if they do not accept, that is not the disappointing end of our relationship but the beginning of a new project. As formulated in Catholic Social Doctrine, we want to shape the world together, with our differences inspiring, rather than hindering us.

HUMBLE TRUTH ORIENTATION

Another contribution came from the Iranian philosopher of religion, Prof. Rasoul Rasoulipur from Kharazmi University, Tehran. According to him—and most Muslims—the Qur'ān's basic message is ethical. Its moral contents corresponds to the human nature. If morality is already in human nature, why would we still need, on top of that, the Qur'ān? What is the role of religion in ethics? Rasoulipur's answer is: in order "to protect this nature in its original form."

Rasoulipur's Qur'ānic reference text was Sura 2:256: "There is no compulsion in religion." Many apologetic Muslims quote this in interreligious exchanges on freedom of religions. Rarely, however, is the question discussed whether the words really speak about freedom of conscience, as Rasoulipur claimed. Did they not, historically, mean something different? Namely: human beings are stubborn—therefore the prophet should not worry if only few convert at his preaching.

The general tendency of Rasoulipur's contribution was, however, not apologetic. He neither hid nor trivialised the almost unanimous classical sharia position: who falls away from Islam is to be killed. Rasoulipur pointed out that the ruling was made when Islam was not only faith community but state; therefore, apostasy was treason. He admits that, like Christians, Muslims did spread their faith through war and conquest. The speaker was also able to see a common tendency in romanticising one's own religion's history.

Rasoulipur's central concern was that dialogue is hindered by missionary activity. In saying this, he quoted the renowned Iranian/U.S. American scholar Sayyed Hossein Nasr. I would respond that mission and dialogue are not two different activities but two attitudes, understandable attitudes of religious people; and that mission and dialogue are compatible: inviting witness to one's conviction—and the humility to listen and co-operate.

Still, Rasoulipur's concern should not be answered conceptually. He was not presenting a logical problem. He was, rather, referring to present-day Christian activities that go against this theology of dialogical mission and indeed against religious freedom; in order to substantiate his claim, he adduced *Time Magazine* reports on concerted U.S.-American "aid evangelism" for Iraq after the allied interference. As future perspective, Rasoulipur offered a helpful formula which he had learned from Henri Sanson († 2010). The French Jesuit recommended to Christians: reflect on your vocation towards Muslims in the mirror of Islam. In other words, Sanson was applying the Golden Rule to missionary perception and planning: envisaging mission in the light of my own fear, complaint, even anger because of what I see as the other religion's missionary activity.

EXHAUSTING BUT EXALTING

The congress's emotional high light happened on Wednesday morning. It was the exact day of *Nostra Aetate's* 50th birthday. The Holy See had announced an "Interreligious Audience" with Pope Francis on St. Peter's square, but the weather was challenging to say the least. Half an hour before the beginning, there was still heavy rain. Still, many of the congress participants had come to their seats close by the Pope with a select group, among them the speakers and organisers, even in the front rows, where the Pontiff would be greet them personally.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran of PCID was the first speaker. He told Pope Francis about the congress and then reviewed *Nostra Aetate's* first fifty years in the light of a biblical verse; Isaiah envisages all peoples as pilgrims to the one holy mountain (25:7). Climbing a mountain – that became Tauran's guiding image: the way has been exhausting – but also exalting.

What is, for the Cardinal, the Conciliar Declaration's significance? With it, he said, the Church has begun to resolutely invite Christians to promote relations with persons of other religions: relations of respect, friendship and dialogue. Tauran thanked the Holy Father for his efforts and examples as man of dialogue.

Cardinal Kurt Koch recalled the pre-history of *Nostra Aetate* n° 4, the section on Judaism, which he called the Declaration's pivot. He thanked Pope Francis for unambiguously speaking of the impossibility of being Christian and, at the same time, anti-Semitic.

A critical reading of what the Cardinals said could ask why they did not use some of the Council's programmatic wording. This needs to be mentioned since the issues are sensible. Koch did not use the word "dialogue." He only spoke of a "culture of encounter"; and when Tauran spoke of relations with "persons of other religions," he did not take up the explicit decision of the Vatican Council to speak of relations with other "religions." That means taking them seriously as traditions, collective memories, teachings, institutions of representation and formation: realities that go beyond the individual believer and should be recognised as such. The Pope's catechesis, by contrast, did use these signal words.

GOD'S VOICE IN TRADITION AND THE HUMAN HEART

Pope Francis started with what can be called a fundamental theology of the Council. What is the theological implication of the renewed perception Vatican II was able to develop of the Church and the world? How is a reading of the signs of the time in the light of the Gospel theologically possible? How can one justify the double faithfulness to Church

tradition and to contemporary humanity? Francis' answer is that we believe: the one who has revealed himself in creation and history, who has spoken through the prophets and has fulfilled his manifestation in Christ, "also addresses the heart and spirit of every human being who looks for the truth and its realisation." The Church wants to understand what God is communicating to her contemporaries.

The Pope's review of Jewish-Christian relations after *Nostra Aetate* turned out favourably; he spoke of a "real transformation." A similar evaluation is not possible for the ecclesial relations to any other religion. The Pontiff professed himself well aware of fundamentalist and extremist deviations. He sees them as a risk to which no religion is immune. The world is suffering from unsolved problems; and Francis admitted not to have a magic solution either: "We believers have no recipe." The Pope reminded the world, however, of the signs of hope; first of all, of what he calls the "flame lit in Assisi," that is, the 1986 prayer. Prayer is, he said, our treasure as people of religion; in a spirit of prayer—that is, alert but without any overestimation of our own capacities—we can face the challenges. Pope Francis mentioned particular areas of productive collaboration between believers of different religions: service to the poor, welcoming migrants, attention to those who are excluded, care of creation.

Wisely, however, the Pontiff never tried to mobilize an alliance of the religions against non-believers. He rather finished in view of the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, which includes a call to collaborate in compassion; a call that can also be taken up, he said, by people who do not consider themselves as believers.

LEARNING TO SPEAK WITH OTHERS, AND ABOUT THEM

The congress's concluding afternoon was dedicated to the question of how values can be transmitted to future generations; therefore, the final talk, the longest of the three days, was dedicated to a motto from the teaching of John Paul II: "Educating for Peace." Speaker was the Holy See's Secretary of State, Cardinal Parolin. A lecture with such a title can be a string of banalities. Therefore, I was listening with this question in mind: where does he go beyond what extremists could equally say?

Now, the standard Roman methodology is to answer questions with quotes from recent Popes. When "peace" is to be studied, one turns to the last peace themed Encyclical. It is *Pacem in Terris* of 1963. Now, however, we live in different times! John XXIII should not simply be quoted. Today, his words require explanation. The present context is not only marked by a secularist challenge, prominently felt in the post-war era. We, rather, live in a time of violence justified by religions. That needs to be on our minds when quoting words

like “the moral order – universal, absolute and unchangeable in its principles – has its objective foundation in the true God.” ISIS would happily subscribe to that. Similarly, education gets, from the same Encyclical, only this objective: to help human beings to become perfect in natural and supernatural terms. One can be sure of al-Baghdadi’s endorsement.

There were, however, other lines in the Cardinal’s speech to profile an orientation for lasting peace: the basis for educational layouts is the acknowledgement of individual freedom and the need to build a world-wide community in respect. Literacy must be promoted further. Education needs to be accessible for all. Special effort is required in educational activity for women and for minorities. Education must not only enable us to speak with each other but also cure our way of speaking about the other: it should be marked by the attempt to listen and understand, by respect, trust and gentleness, which is “the real strength.” As means to develop a sense for what lies beneath the merely empirical, poetry, art, music and aesthetics need to be part of an education that deserves the name. With that in mind, Parolin ended his lecture quoting a poem. “Peace requires struggle, suffering, persistence; costs a high price: of misunderstanding and sacrifice. Peace rejects the temptation of pleasure.” A certain context insensibility might still have been felt in this, but because of the Cardinal’s humble, reconciling manners, no-one seemed to get the lines wrong.

A CRITICAL CONSIDERATION

In order to inspire future planning, the question needs to be asked: what was missing? Here are two personal considerations. There is nothing particular about having non-Christians at Wednesday Audiences; calling the event, this time, an “interreligious audience” is, therefore, a boasting claim, a misnomer. Apparently, there was not enough courage to invite representatives of other religions to speak on St. Peter’s Square. That leads us to the second consideration, the elephant in the room. The Church has lost her initial interreligious energy, quality and perspective. Many of the old flagships of Catholic-Muslim dialogue had not even come to Rome; nor seemed new figures to enter the scene. The last years have seen formulations, also on the Catholic side, that seem to come from the idea that we have to change our dialogical attitude because of the others’ aggression. Such thoughts must be behind the 2014 PCID document *Dialogue in Truth and Charity*. It is of an alarmist, dualist tonality. Another problem is the clinical avoiding of the word “dialogue” in parts of the Catholic academic discourse. To my perception, interreligious dialogue is in crisis; and the Catholic Church seems to have lost its prior constructive leadership role in starting processes of reconciliation between the religions. The congress, so thoughtfully prepared, never tried to discuss the fact-let alone its causes.