

Benedict XVI and Islam

Rethinking Theological Interactions

Abstract: Pope Benedict XVI's fundamental reservations about theological dialogue with Islam continue to challenge Muslim–Christian encounters. However, challenges need not be obstacles. Joseph Ratzinger proved to be a pope of “reflection”, pointing to unresolved issues in the Church's interaction with Islam. His hesitations can guide us towards a renewed and interactive theology of interreligious dialogue. Such a theology can enable the growth both of personal religious identity and of the theological understanding of communities.

Felix Körner, SJ holds the Nicolas Cusanus Chair for Theology of Religions at the Institute of Catholic Theology of Humboldt University, Berlin. As a scholar of Islam, he is known for his expertise in Turkish theology. He lived in Ankara (2002–2008) and taught sacraments and interreligious dialogue at the Pontifical Gregorian University (2008–2019).

What will the pontificate of Benedict XVI mean for Catholic–Muslim relations?¹ As we seek an answer we should consider five contexts.

1 Fundamentals. Joseph Ratzinger was a systematic theologian. Early on, he turned his back on overly abstract scholastic methodology. Instead, this extraordinarily gifted young thinker soon found inspiration in authors who wrote with spiritual passion and linguistic genius, such as Bonaventure; he also found the Church Fathers fascinating and nourishing, especially Saint Augustine. Ratzinger drew on authors such as these as he approached the core themes of 20th century fundamental theology: the Church, the theology of history, and scriptural hermeneutics. Thus he developed his particular epistemological approach, holding that a genuine theologian is a person already seized by truth and therefore enthusiastically searching for it.²

2 Controversy. Joseph Ratzinger formed his own style of arguing early on. He was never much concerned with presenting counter-positions in an empathising manner. Rather, he brought out his own convictions by setting them over against his opponents, whose views he sketched in rough outline. His adversaries were normally other Christian thinkers, contemporary or classical, preferably Protestants. Already his doctoral supervisor, Gottlieb Söhngen, observed in him a certain “Bavarian quarrelsomeness”.³ It comes as no surprise, then, if Ratzinger's approach to Islam—both in methodology and themes—felt like an inner-Christian struggle: letting true Catholic teaching emerge from controversy and contrast.

3 Idyll. Throughout his life, Benedict XVI remembered his “beautiful home in the Bavarian foothills of the Alps”.⁴ The only prayer request he expresses in his Spiritual Testament is that “our country will

¹ The present paper builds on—and develops—two recent publications of mine, viz., “Benedikt XVI. und der Islam. Religionstheologische Reflexion,” *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 1/2023, 2–10 and “Ein Ratzinger-Riss? Katholisch–islamische Beziehungen nach dem deutschen Papst,” *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts Bensheim* 1/2023, 69–75. I am grateful to John Borelli and Werner Höbsch for important suggestions and to David Marshall for helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

² “No one can have the truth. It is the truth that possesses us, it is a living thing! We do not possess it but are held by it.” Homily during Holy Mass concluding the meeting with the “Ratzinger Schülerkreis,” 2 September 2012: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20120902_ratzinger-schueler-kreis.html (accessed 18 May, 2023). The Vatican's English version does not convey the full range of Benedict's choice of German words. When he claims that we are “held by it”, he alludes to Matthew 14:31 and Philippians 3:12 and thus says something like “we are seized by” truth (“Niemand kann die Wahrheit haben, die Wahrheit hat uns, sie ist etwas Lebendiges! Wir sind nicht ihre Besitzer, sondern wir sind von ihr ergriffen.”)

³ Peter Hofmann, “Benedikt XVI. Einladung zum Lesen,” *Eulenfisch. Sonderheft zum Papstbesuch* 2011, 6–10, 6.

⁴ Benedict XVI, “My Spiritual Testament,” 29 August 2006: <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/elezione/documents/testamento-spirituale-bxvi.html> (accessed 18 May 2023).

remain a country of faith” (ibid.). It seems that he had an idyll before his eyes, endangered, but not yet lost—and thus comforting. He ignored the fact that after he left Bavaria it had changed considerably, with fascinating Muslim realities emerging even in the foothills of the Alps.⁵

4 Recluse. Benedict confessed that books were his “true friends”.⁶ Accordingly, his statements about Islam arose not from personal encounters but from scholarly reflection on theological issues. Furthermore, imagining how people of other generations and religions might feel and react was palpably not his guiding consideration.

5 Vatican II. Benedict XVI’s decisions and actions need to be seen in the context of the history of the reception of the Second Vatican Council. How did he understand its basic concerns? In his view, the Council wanted to “give Christianity back its power to shape history”.⁷ Joseph Ratzinger had himself been a highly engaged theological *peritus* at Vatican II. Now, after two predecessor pontificates that had decisively promoted interfaith dialogue, he presented a distinctive interpretation of the Council. He called it “hermeneutics of reform,” but explicitly used the word “reform” in the sense of renewal in continuity. Benedict therefore unambiguously rejected the reading of Vatican II documents in light of a “conciliar spirit” behind the texts.⁸ His own emphases, also in relation to Islam, are therefore to be seen in relation to the approaches of Paul VI and John Paul II.

Prehistory (1): Paul VI as Pope of “realisation”

The dialogical attitude of Paul VI could be summarised as “realisation.” He brought to fruition what John XXIII had often only intuitively grasped and gestured towards. It was Paul VI who founded the first Vatican authority for interreligious dialogue: an office originally named “Secretariat for Non-Christians” (launched in 1964) and subsequently renamed “Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue” (*Pastor bonus*, 1988) and “Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue” (*Predicate Evangelium*, 2022). Paul VI visited countries with a Muslim majority: the Holy Land—starting in Jordan—right at the beginning of his pontificate (1964), and Turkey in 1967. On a 1969 apostolic journey to Uganda he gave a special address to representatives of Islam for the first time, saying that he was sure that they would join him in his prayers to the Almighty to put into the hearts of Africans the longing for pardon and reconciliation which both the Gospel and the Qur’an so strongly commended.⁹ His great journey to Asia in 1970 concluded in Indonesia, with visits en route to Iran and Pakistan. Paul VI obviously carried out the Council’s dialogical concern. But he had also “realised”—i.e., recognised—the *theological significance* of interreligious dialogue. Already in his inaugural Encyclical (more than a year before the publication of *Nostra aetate*, the Declaration on the attitude of the Church towards non-Christian religions,—but probably influenced by a draft version of it) he was able to count Muslims among those “who worship the one supreme God, whom we also worship” (*Ecclesiam suam* 107 [111]). Of Muslims he writes, “We do well to admire these people for all that is good and true in their worship of God” (ibid.). A further illustration of the Pope’s “realization” of the theological relevance of interfaith dialogue was his appointment of the eminent biblical theologian Piero Rossano († 1991) as the Secreta-

5 Cf. e.g., the Islamic community of Penzberg with its acclaimed mosque architecture: <https://islam-penzberg.de> (accessed 18 May 2023).

6 Attested to the author by Fr. Peter Hans Kolvenbach, SJ († 2016).

7 “Das II. Vatikanische Konzil hatte ja genau dies gewollt: dem Christentum wieder geschichtsbildende Kraft verleihen,” Joseph Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum*, “Vorwort zur Neuauflage 2000”, Kösel, Munich 2000, 9–26, 11.

8 If one reads the Council’s texts in light of discontinuity, one “claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the Council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts. These innovations alone were supposed to represent the true spirit of the Council, and starting from and in conformity with them, it would be possible to move ahead.” https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html (accessed 18 May 2023). The English translation (via the Italian version) misrepresents Benedict’s description of the hermeneutics of rupture when claiming that according to them, “impulses [*slanci*] toward the new” are “contained [*sottesì*]” in the texts and that these “innovations [*essi*]” represent the spirit of the Council. In the German—which is palpably the Ratzingerian original—he reports that others see an “enthusiasm [*Elan*]” as the foundation [*zugrunde liege*] of these texts, and that in this enthusiasm is [*liege*] the conciliar spirit.

9 https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1969/august/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19690801_comunita-islamiche.html (accessed 18 May 2023).

riat's consultor, then its undersecretary.¹⁰

Prehistory (2): John Paul II as Pope of "relation"

If Paul VI's concern with dialogue can be understood as "realisation," then John Paul II's can be described as "relation," and that, again, on several levels. He wanted to establish and cultivate the Church's *ad extra* relations. What happened in 1981, after the assassination attempt against him, was moving. The crime had been committed by a Turkish Muslim (who, however, later called himself Jesus Christ born again). The Pope forgave his assassin as he recovered in hospital; and two years later he visited him in prison.

On his apostolic journey to Africa in 1985, the Polish Pope accepted an invitation from the King of Morocco to speak to young Muslims. 80,000 were gathered in Casablanca when John Paul II proclaimed: "We believe in the same God."¹¹ He went on to say that the faithful want to promote friendship among all people.

The Assisi World Day of Prayer for Peace (1986), to which he invited religious representatives from all over the world, was particularly impressive and expressive of the programme of the Pope of "relation," the founder of relationships. However, Karol Wojtyła's decision to hold this event did not go unchallenged. Cardinal Ratzinger was quoted as stating after the 1986 Assisi gathering (which he did not attend): "This cannot be the model!"¹² His comment was probably not a rejection of the whole Assisi event but rather a reference to the concluding ceremony where the various religious representatives stood together as a group and each group offered a prayer for peace while the others listened in silence. In 2003 he expressed his concern more clearly about events at which people of different religions come together to pray: "Such a procedure almost inevitably leads to false interpretations, to indifference as to the content of what is believed or not believed, and thus to the dissolution of real faith."¹³ However, John Paul II was also a Pope of "relation" in the sense that he gave the Church's relationship to the world's religions a new theological context, namely, the universal work of the Holy Spirit, which precedes every explicit proclamation of Christ. In his inaugural Encyclical he proposes a pneumatological framework for a Catholic theology of religions when he describes "the firm belief (*persuasio/credenza*) of the followers of the non-Christian religions" as an "effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body [of the Church]" (*Redemptor hominis* 6).

In 2000, the declaration *Dominus Iesus* appeared, signed by the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger, and his secretary Tarcisio Bertone. The declaration apparently sought to correct John Paul II's pneumatological approach, taking a stand against precisely the idea just quoted from *Redemptor hominis* 6, when it declared the belief of others to be something purely human and sharply contrasted it with "faith" as acceptance of the revelation of Christ (*DI* 4, 7). The publication of such counter-opinions might reflect an inner-Vatican tension. With the election of Joseph Ratzinger as successor to John Paul II, an exclusivist Christocentric theology (*Dominus Iesus*) seemed to gain the upper hand over an inclusivist pneumatological one (*Redemptor hominis*). Does this assessment do justice to the German pope?

10 Cf., Giulio Osto, *La testimonianza del dialogo. Piero Rossano tra Bibbia, religioni e cultura*, Glossa, Milano-Roma 2019.

11 "Chrétiens et musulmans, nous avons beaucoup de choses en commun, comme croyants et comme hommes. Nous vivons dans le même monde, marqué par de nombreux signes d'espérance, mais aussi par de multiples signes d'angoisse. Abraham est pour nous un même modèle de foi en Dieu, de soumission à sa volonté et de confiance en sa bonté. Nous croyons au même Dieu, le Dieu unique, le Dieu vivant, le Dieu qui crée les mondes et porte ses créatures à leur perfection."—"Christians and Muslims, we have many things in common, as believers and as human beings. We live in the same world, marked by many signs of hope, but also by multiple signs of anguish. For us, Abraham is a very model of faith in God, of submission to his will and of confidence in his goodness. We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection." http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/fr/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850819_giovani-stadio-casablanca.html (accessed 18 May 2023).

12 <http://nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/pfw092206.htm> (accessed 3 July, 2023).

13 Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance. Christian Belief and World Religions*, Translated by Henry Taylor, Ignatius: San Francisco 2004, 107.

The Ratzinger pontificate: dialogue in crisis?

With Joseph Ratzinger, a man of sharp thinking had ascended to Saint Peter's Chair. He seemed to give little thought, however, to the impact of his decisions and words on his global public. Three events during his pontificate should be recalled. Each of them strengthens the impression that he let himself be carried away by his tendency to make harsh judgements about Catholic–Muslim dialogue, without foreseeing their effect on those who think differently and believe differently.

(1) *Only evil and inhuman?*

In September 2006 Benedict visited the city of Regensburg in his homeland, Bavaria. Here he had been a professor of theology for eight years, much longer than he had held his earlier positions in Freising (one year), Bonn (four years), Münster (three years) and Tübingen (three years). Now, almost thirty years after leaving his last academic chair, Joseph Ratzinger gave what became known as his Regensburg lecture, in which he infelicitously quoted Manuel II Palaiologos, the Eastern Roman Emperor. According to Manuel's own account, he had, while debating in 1391 with an Islamic thinker in the Muslim's Ankara (Ankyra) house, uttered the provocation which Benedict repeated: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."¹⁴ The Pope-theologian wanted to contrast rational Christianity with irrational Islam. In doing so, he overlooked three points:

- the early and highly rational philosophical-theological tradition of the Islamic world;¹⁵
- the attitude of *Nostra aetate* 3, which had spoken of the Church's "high esteem" for Muslims and had exhorted the faithful "to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom."¹⁶ Benedict's choice of words in 2006 was clearly contrary to this; but he had probably also overlooked
- the more-than-merely-rational concept of Christian rationality presented in later passages of Manuel's debate. His Muslim interlocutor points out that some of Jesus' "laws" are "against reason"¹⁷. He adduces examples such as life in poverty, love of enemies and celibacy. Now the emperor's response¹⁸ is no defence of Christianity's purely rational character. By contrast, he comments that those injunctions are Christ's encouragements, counsels¹⁹ rather than universal rules binding all humanity. Human beings are capable of following them by the help of God.²⁰ So in these counsels one can see a "law which goes beyond the natural, pulls everything towards virtue and provides a support in decision-making".²¹ The Christian faith thus goes beyond natural perception and rational thought. Therefore it "allows the faithful to perceive future events vividly already now" [FN: IX.1.2.].

Pope Benedict failed to take account of these three points. His Regensburg lecture initially caused horror: shame among dialogue experts, anger on the Islamic side and bewilderment among Lutheran interlocutors (because in the same address the Pope had also accused the theology of the Reformation

14 The quotation was introduced in Benedict's manuscript with the warning that its wording came "with a startling [erstaunlicher] brusqueness". Spontaneously he even added "with a startling brusqueness, a brusqueness that we find surprising [in uns überraschender Form]". In the version published after the protests, the introduction now reads: "with a startling brusqueness, a brusqueness that we find unacceptable": http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html (accessed 19 May 2023). For Emperor Manuel's dialogue, a useful bilingual (but also text-critically valuable) edition, building on Erich Trapp's standard edition, is: Karl Förstel, *Manuel II Palaiologos, Dialoge mit einem Muslim*, 3 Volumes, Ooros, Würzburg, 1993, 1994, 1996.

15 For masterly research on these traditions consult the work of Josef van Ess († 2021), especially his six volume study *Theologie und Gesellschaft im zweiten und dritten Jahrhundert Hidschra. Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, De Gruyter, Berlin 1991–1997, translated into English as *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra. A History of Religious Thought in Early Islam*, Brill, Leiden 2017–2020.

16 Since one cannot decree command people to forget, the German version probably hits the point when it exhorts "to leave aside" past enmities (*beiseite lassen*). FELIX: a further revision suggested above, re 'decree to forget'. Logically, of course this makes sense, but it feels rather strange

17 VII.2.6: ἔξω λόγου.

18 VII.3.7: ἀπολογία.

19 VII.3.7: παραινήσεις, συμβουλαί.

20 VII.3.5.

21 VII.3.12: Ὅρατε νόμον ὑπερφυᾶ ἔλκοντα μὲν εἰς ἀρετὴν ἅπαντα, συμμαχίαν δὲ τῇ προαιρέσει παρέχοντα.

of lacking rationality).

(2) Syncretism and relativism?

Even a few years before his resignation, Benedict sometimes went to extraordinary lengths to reassure opponents of interreligious dialogue. In 2011 he responded to a letter of complaint from an Evangelical theologian and missionary, also a former Tübingen colleague, Peter Beyerhaus († 2020). Benedict had announced that he would go to the hometown of Saint Francis for the 25th anniversary of the 1986 World Day of Prayer. Beyerhaus hoped that the Pope would take a clearer stand against a coming together of religions and repeatedly expressed misgivings about interreligious dialogue. Benedict tried to reassure Beyerhaus with these words: “I understand very well your concern about my participation in the Assisi jubilee. But this commemoration had to be celebrated in any case, and after all deliberation it seemed best to me to go there myself and thus try to determine the direction of the whole thing. In any case, I will do everything to make a syncretistic or relativistic interpretation of the event impossible and to make it clear that I continue to believe and confess what I had recalled to the Church in the letter *Dominus Iesus*.”²²

In addressing Professor Beyerhaus’ worries, Benedict sounded as if he was his Evangelical colleague’s pastor, also making it clear how strongly he stood behind *Dominus Iesus* and how determined he still was to defend the Church against “relativism”. In the last days before his election to Saint Peter’s Chair, fighting against “relativism” had become something of fundamental importance to Cardinal Ratzinger.

(3) Interreligious dialogue impossible?

In his first year as pontiff, Benedict XVI integrated the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue into the Pontifical Council for Culture. He removed the previous president of the Dialogue Council, Michael Fitzgerald—an archbishop known for his well-informed and proactive work—and sent him to Egypt as nuncio.

What was behind this? An interpretation suggested itself in comments written by Benedict in 2008 on a book by Marcello Pera (* 1943), an Italian philosopher and rightwing politician, in which the Pope argued that interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the word was not possible. However, we must be cautious here. It is unclear whether Benedict was merely summarising Pera’s views or actively supporting him. Benedict addressed the author thus: “You state with all clarity that an interreligious dialogue in the narrower sense of the word is not possible, while the intercultural dialogue, which deepens the cultural consequences of the underlying decision of faith, is all the more necessary.— While a real dialogue is not possible about the decision of faith unless one brackets one’s own faith, the cultural consequences of the fundamental faith decision must be dealt with in public debate. Here dialogue and mutual correction and enrichment are possible and necessary.”²³ What this means in terms of theology of religions and ecclesial politics will become clear in what follows.

22 Cited in Manfred Hauke, “Assisi III. Anliegen und Problematik,” *Theologisches* 41 (2011) 541–558, 542. Also accessible at <https://katholisches.info/2011/10/04/benedikt-xvi-uber-assisi-3-werde-alles-tun-damit-eine-synkretistische-oder-relativistische-auslegung-unmoglich-wird-hab-vertrauen/> (accessed 31 July, 2023).

23 “Sie erklären mit aller Deutlichkeit, ein interreligiöser Dialog im engeren Sinne des Wortes sei nicht möglich, während der interkulturelle Dialog, der die kulturellen Folgen der zugrunde liegenden Glaubensentscheidung vertieft, umso notwendiger sei. – Während über die Glaubensentscheidung ein wirklicher Dialog nicht möglich ist, ohne dabei den eigenen Glauben auszuklammern, müssen in der öffentlichen Konfrontation die kulturellen Folgen der grundsätzlichen Glaubensentscheidung behandelt werden. Hier sind der Dialog und eine gegenseitige Korrektur sowie eine gegenseitige Bereicherung möglich und notwendig.” Preface to Marcello Pera, *Perché dobbiamo dirci cristiani*, Milan 2008. (On this, Felix Körner, “Dialog unmöglich? Leitlinien für ein Glaubensgespräch mit Muslimen“, *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 2/2009, 48–50.) The English edition of 2011 offers a preface which comes no longer in the form of a personal letter to the author and no longer features the idea of mutual correction and enrichment: “The reader may be surprised at first that Pera holds that interreligious dialogue, in the strict sense of the word, is not possible, while at the same time he greatly stresses the need for intercultural dialogue. How should we understand this? Pera seeks to argue that, for true believers, the essential faith decisions are not open to discussion. The question, for example, of whether God is or is not triune is not in the final analysis a subject for discussion; on this issue, the yes or no that one gives to the question is a decision taken in faith. Certainly, one can try to explain the inner logic of this apparently contradictory vision and clarify misunderstandings and erroneous interpretations; however, the yes or no as such is not a subject for discussion. But of course one can and must pursue sincere dialogue regarding the ethical and cultural consequences of such fundamental religious decisions in order to attain, in the diversity of these fundamental decisions, the possibility of responsible common action.” Marcello Pera, *Why We Should Call Ourselves Christians. The Religious Roots of Free Societies*, Encounter, New York/London 2011, viii–ix.

Benedict XVI in dialogue with Islam: consequences for “pastorality”

Three times, the Vatican office for interreligious relations has spoken programmatically in a systematic document on dialogue:²⁴

- in 1984, in *Dialogue and Mission*;²⁵
- in 1991, in *Dialogue and Proclamation*, written in collaboration with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith;²⁶
- in 2014, in *Dialogue in Truth and Charity*.²⁷

Can a “Pope Benedict effect” be determined behind the evolution of the texts? The best way to check this is to look at the documents’ different approaches. More precisely, one should ask how the various texts apply what may be called the “pastorality” of Vatican II.²⁸ Much depends on how we understand this expression. “Pastoral” can merely mean that a preconceived dogma is now translated into a protocol for practical implementation. However, the theological approach of the Second Vatican Council was fundamentally different as it was rooted in the understanding of the world in terms of the history of salvation (cf., *DV* 2). This is also reflected in the first sections of *Nostra aetate*. Here one sees that to proceed in the perspective of history of salvation is a three step method.

- The starting point is a look at the present situation, as in the Declaration’s first words “In our time—*Nostra aetate*”. This look at the present is neither lamenting nor accusing, but appreciative and marked by a sense of shared human responsibility. The Council Fathers see humanity moving closer together. In fact, they diagnosed what is now called “globalisation”, although this term was only emerging during the conciliar years.²⁹

- A theological reflection follows. Growing together is seen as part of salvation history, part of the realisation of God’s will (cf., *LG* 1).

- Immediately, however, the Council faces the question of how the Church can serve people in today’s changed situation, aware that the world expects from the Church answers to life questions. The pastoral approach taken by the Council is seen in this interest in today’s people, and in what is of concern to them, as a context for theology.

In short, one might say that the Church’s pastorality is an *ab extra—ad intra—ad extra* dynamic. (It perceives, indeed often shares, people’s present experiences, hopes and worries, questions and critiques; it reads them in the light of the gospel as signs of the times, and with that in mind tries to respond to humanity’s needs.) With this perspective, let us look at the three programmatic texts on interreligious dialogue.

Each of the two interreligious documents from 1984 and 1991 begins with an analysis of its current era. The most recent text, from 2014, on the other hand, begins with scholastic definitions of terms before looking at the present; furthermore, its interpretation of current affairs emphasizes a list of difficulties.³⁰ Expressly, and remarkably, this most recent of the three texts has a different understanding of the meaning of “pastoral” (n° 4): rather than starting from the life situations and life questions of people, “pastoral” now means that the Roman headquarters decree what practitioners in their various places should do. How can this regression in fundamental attitude be explained? One needs to see its redactional context. It was not written shortly before its publication in 2014, in the early years of Francis’ pontificate; rather, it was drafted years before, and had remained almost unedited since 2008. At that time, the magisterial theology of religions stood in the shadow of *Dominus Iesus* (which *Dialogue in Truth and Charity* cites extensively: n° 15) and by the still distorted image of Islam which

24 In addition to the documents mentioned, the *Orientations pour un dialogue entre chrétiens et musulmans* have been published in the name of the Vatican office in various editions from 1967. The *Orientations* go back to two Roman-Catholic experts in Islamic Studies, Joseph Cuq and Louis Gardet.

25 <https://www.dicasteryinterreligious.va/dialogue-and-mission-1984> (accessed 19 May 2023).

26 <https://www.dicasteryinterreligious.va/dialogue-and-proclamation> (accessed 19 May 2023).

27 <https://www.dicasteryinterreligious.va/dialogue-in-truth-and-charity> (accessed 19 May 2023).

28 Michael Sievernich, “Die ›Pastoralität‹ des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils,” Mariano Delgado und Michael Sievernich (eds.), *Die großen Metaphern des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils. Ihre Bedeutung für heute*, Herder, Freiburg 2013, 35–58.

29 The *Historische Wörterbuch der Philosophie* points s.v. “globalisation” to secondary literature on International Law from the 1960s as the first evidence for the word.

30 *Dialogue and Mission* (1984), § 2. *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) § 4; terminology is discussed in *Dialogue and Proclamation* only later at §§ 8–13. The structure is different in *Dialogue in Truth and Charity* (2014), where § 2 already defines terminology, and, almost ironically, this terminological section begins with the words „In our time“(§ 4).

characterised the first years of Pope Benedict's pontificate. The Consultors of the Dialogue Council of that time therefore apparently believed that the Pope had reservations about interreligious dialogue in principle, and that their task was to confirm his views rather than correct them where necessary.³¹ This explains how a text such as *Dialogue in Truth and Charity* came to be published in 2014 and written under Pope Benedict XVI. However, had he been understood correctly?

Purification and enrichment: a theological solution

Palpably, the impression persisted that Benedict XVI was opposed to interreligious dialogue. Does this impression reflect reality? It is precisely the formula of mutual correction and enrichment, which appeared in the aforementioned letter to Marcello Pera, that can help us to understand Pope Benedict better. He in fact used the pairing of "purification" and "enrichment" at a decisive point in his life as the key to interfaith dialogue.

Let us for a moment relive the days before Christmas 2012. Benedict XVI has already decided to step down from office. No papal resignation had happened since the Middle Ages. As expected, the news would shake the Church. Benedict has already told a few confidants of his decision;³² but now, on 21 December, when he gathers the cardinals for the pre-Christmas reception, he does not want to spoil the festive joy for them and for all Christians. So, he keeps quiet about his intention. His address, however, offers more than Christmas greetings. Here he once again reflects fundamentally on the encounter of religions, and explicitly refers to "interreligious dialogue."³³ Here, even more clearly than in the letter to Pera, we can also see why he considered this expression problematic. Benedict presents dialogue with other religions as a dynamic and deepening process. The beginning of the dialogical process is simply living together: the act of sharing the space in which we live is already dialogue. This context of encounter opens up the next dimension, namely, raising and solving social problems. One will thus also come to discuss underlying political visions, which will involve using concepts such as justice and peace. Therefore the process of dialogue has by itself begun to speak about "ethical" foundations. From there, even more profound themes come into sight, especially the fundamental anthropological question of *das rechte Menschsein*: "the right way to live as a human being".

Two comments on Benedict's presentation of interreligious encounter are in place. The Pope succeeded in uncovering an inherent dynamism of the dialogical process: it evolves organically from the surface to profound reflection. Remarkably, on the other side, Benedict left out two "forms" of dialogue mentioned by Church documents: dialogue of religious experience and "dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages" (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, 42). Benedict obviously wanted to avoid giving the impression that Christians might negotiate an interreligious compromise about core tenets of faith. That is probably why he said right at the beginning of his description of the dialogical process: "This will not involve discussing the great themes of faith – whether God is Trinitarian or how the inspiration of the sacred Scriptures is to be understood, and so on." Benedict XVI seemed to hold this restriction as a principle of all interreligious dialogue. Therefore he underlined that even at the deepest level of such encounters with other believers "the fundamental choices themselves are not under discussion".

Benedict seems to sense in what he suggests here a certain tension with his own fundamental theology. This is probably why he now immediately makes it clear that a Christian's "choice of identity" (*Identitätsentscheid*) is not something to be determined in an arbitrary, individual decision. Rather, religious faith is based on truth acknowledged. In light of this consideration, at the end of his train of

31 Cf., e.g., Samir Khalil Samir SJ, "Benedict XVI and Islam", <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Benedict-XVI-and-Islam-5998.html> (accessed 19 May 2023).

32 Cf., <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/papst-bruder-georg-ratzinger-ueber-den-ruecktritt-von-benedikt-xvi-a-882747.html> (accessed 22 May 2023).

33 http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121221_auguri-curia.html (accessed 19 May 2023). All other quotations in this section of the text above are also from Benedict's 2012 pre-Christmas address. A study of Benedict's words requires constant reference to the German text because it is clearly the original. See for example the Pope's formula "*Dialog des Miteinander*", which was rendered in Italian as "dialogo della condivisione pratica" and from there analogically in the other Latin languages, whereas the English version, following the German more closely, has "dialogue of being together".

thought, dialogue with people of other religions looks different, too:

- The point of dialogue is not that one side should come closer to the convictions of the other, but that both sides should come closer to truth together.
 - In this process, Christians need not see themselves as being on a path leading away from God. They may, rather, trust that they are coming ever closer to the truth by which they have already been seized. “To be sure, we do not possess the truth, the truth possesses us: Christ, who is the truth, has taken us by the hand, and we know that his hand is holding us securely on the path of our quest for knowledge. Being inwardly held by the hand of Christ makes us free and keeps us safe.”³⁴
- In light of this, Benedict’s other statements on interfaith dialogue during his last Christmas reception also seem to take on a different colour:
- Today, “the dialogue of religions is a necessary condition for peace in the world and it is therefore a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities.”³⁵
 - “In the process, it is necessary to learn to accept the other in his otherness and the otherness of his thinking. To this end, the shared responsibility for justice and peace must become the guiding principle of the conversation.”
 - Thus, “the search for an answer to a specific question becomes a process in which, through listening to the other, both sides can obtain purification and enrichment.”

Here it is again: the felicitous description of interreligious dialogue as enabling mutual purification and enrichment.³⁶ This pairing was already almost 30 years old when Benedict XVI included it in his Christmas address. Its first appearance is in the following passage: “As the human sciences have emphasized, in interpersonal dialogue one experiences one’s own limitations as well as the possibility of overcoming them. A person discovers that he does not possess the truth in a perfect and total way but can walk together with others towards that goal. Mutual assessment, reciprocal correction, and fraternal exchange lead the partners in dialogue to an ever-greater maturity which in turn generates interpersonal communion. Religious experiences and outlooks can themselves be purified and enriched [!] in this process of encounter. / The dynamic of human encounter should lead us Christians to listen to and strive to understand that which other believers communicate to us in order to profit from the gifts which God bestows so generously.”³⁷

At this point we might ask a critical question in the spirit of Pope Benedict XVI. If all truth is in Christ and we may know Christ, then surely the encounter with others can no longer enrich us: what else do we want to discover in addition to all truth? The answer is already suggested in view of the biblical passage which locates “all the treasures of knowledge” as being “in Christ” – but speaks of them as “hidden” in Christ: “In him [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). Thus, people acknowledging Christ as Lord do not have the list of all truths in their hands. Rather, acknowledging Christ and discovering the treasures of knowledge still hidden in him is a path that will remain unfinished until the end of history. We are still on pilgrimage along that path. This explication of what Benedict did not say expressly is in line with what he preached to his circle of former students, also in 2012: “no one can have the truth. It is the truth that possesses us, it is a living thing! We do not possess it but are held by it. Only if we allow ourselves to be guided and moved by the truth, do we remain in it. Only if we are, with it and in it, pilgrims of truth, then it is in us and for us.”³⁸

34 “Gewiß, wir haben die Wahrheit nicht, aber sie hat uns: Christus, der die Wahrheit ist, hat uns bei der Hand genommen, und wir wissen auf dem Weg unseres Ringens um Erkenntnis, daß seine Hand uns festhält. Das innere Gehaltensein des Menschen von der Hand Christi macht uns frei und zugleich sicher” (ibid.).

35 Pope Francis quotes this affirmation prominently in *Evangelii gaudium*, 250.

36 Cf., Felix Körner, “Prefazione”, Giulio Osto, *La testimonianza del dialogo*, XXV–XXIX.

37 *Dialogue and Mission*, n° 21; Pope Francis also quotes the formula of “purification and enrichment” in his programmatic Apostolic Exhortation, with reference to Benedict’s Christmas address: *Evangelii gaudium*, n° 250.

38 This official English translation contains a mistake, which appears to have arisen in the process of translation from the Italian to the English version. The German original has “durch uns” (Italian, “per noi”) where the English now wrongly reads “for us” rather than “through us”; https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20120902_rattinger-schuelererkreis.html (accessed 18 May, 2023).

Effective history: the Pope of “reflection”

We suggested above that Paul VI may be described as the Pope of “realisation” in relation to interreligious dialogue. We offered that concept because he *implemented* the dialogical vision of the Council and also *recognised* its theological—not merely political or atmospheric—significance; and we proposed the description of John Paul II as the Pope of “relation”, who cultivated friendly relationships with others but who also understood cultures and religions in their relationship to the activity of the Holy Spirit. Now, for Pope Benedict XVI, a concept similar to “realisation” and “relation” suggests itself. This thoughtful Pope was indeed a man of “reflection” with regard to the dialogue of religions: he kept thinking about its foundations. Reflection, however, does not only mean intellectual productivity; it also means consciously looking at one’s own actions and, where these are recognised as inadequate, trying to improve them. In this sense also it can be shown that Benedict was a Pope of reflection on the dialogue with Islam.

This point is perhaps best illustrated by the aftermath of the Regensburg lecture. We have outlined its problems above. One could almost have foreseen what, of course, happened: many Muslim believers expressed disappointment, hurt, and even anger. Long-established bonds of understanding were broken. In the course of time, however, the lecture did have certain welcome consequences, of which three will be identified.

- Shortly after his Regensburg lecture, Pope Benedict XVI gave what may be called his Ankara address. At the headquarters of the Turkish authority of religious (i.e., Islamic) affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*), he said: “As an illustration of the fraternal respect with which Christians and Muslims can work together, I would like to quote some words addressed by Pope Gregory VII in 1076 to a Muslim prince in North Africa who had acted with great benevolence towards the Christians under his jurisdiction. Pope Gregory spoke of the particular charity that Christians and Muslims owe to one another ‘because we believe in one God, albeit in a different manner, and because we praise him and worship him every day as the Creator and Ruler of the world.’”³⁹
- Not much later, the Dialogue Council was again given an independent and high-ranking leader in Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, a senior diplomat. The latter’s predecessor, Archbishop Fitzgerald, was rehabilitated only under Benedict’s successor: Pope Francis admitted him to the College of Cardinals on an honorary basis in 2019.
- In response to the Regensburg lecture, a group of 38 Muslims sent a letter to Pope Benedict.⁴⁰ The Holy See never replied to this letter! However, instead of expressing their bewilderment at this diplomatic faux pas, the Islamic side wrote another letter, the following year, now with 138 signatures and addressed to many Christian leaders in the world, and no longer in reference to Regensburg, but with its own theme. This was the substantial letter on love of God and love of neighbour, the well-known *A Common Word* (ACW).⁴¹ This time, with leadership reestablished at the Vatican’s Dialogue Council, a response was possible and was given. Now a new format of encounters could be founded, the “Catholic–Muslim Forum”. Within its framework, a whole series of international meetings (“seminars”) of leaders, experts and observers have taken place, with clearly prepared themes, the first in 2008, the most recent in 2017.⁴²

That Pope Benedict wanted dialogue with Islam to be a process of *reflection* is illustrated by the fact that ACW received a high-level response, namely from Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone. He proposed what Benedict himself wanted: a group of signatories of ACW should meet with an equally strong group from the Catholic side. The Pope mentioned the pontifical institutions in Rome

39 https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20061128_pres-religious-affairs.html (accessed 20 May 2023).

40 <https://ammanmessage.com/media/openLetter/english.pdf> (accessed 20 May 2023).

41 <https://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document> (accessed 20 May 2023).

42 Felix Körner, “Das erste Seminar im katholisch–muslimischen Forum. Theologische und islamwissenschaftliche Auswertung,” Mariano Delgado, Guido Vergauwen (eds.), *Interkulturalität. Begegnung und Wandel in den Religionen* (Religionsforum, Band 5), Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2009, 229–248; and id., “Hoffnung auf Verständigung. Zum zweiten Mal traf sich das Katholisch–Muslimische Forum,” *HerderKorrespondenz* 66 (2012), 193–198. Final declarations: (1) <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2008/11/06/0699/01722.html> – (2) <https://www.acommonword.com/docs/FinalDeclarationEN.pdf> – (3) <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2014/11/13/0846/01813.html> – (4) <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/11/10/171110c.html>.

that have the philological and theological expertise for a scholarly Christian–Muslim dialogue, specifically naming the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) and the Gregorian University.⁴³ This response probably showed most clearly that Benedict XVI was a Pope of reflection in Christian–Muslim dialogue: he encouraged reflection and showed a willingness to learn.

What remains: looking ahead

Pope Benedict enriched the dialogue with Islam primarily through three emphases. They are summarised here and explored for their productive potential.

(1) *Interreligious encounter in many dimensions*

On his apostolic journey to England in 2010, the German pontiff succeeded in classifying interreligious dialogue and interreligious cooperation via the category of “dimensions.”⁴⁴ In London Pope Benedict XVI named the double challenge of, on the one hand, standing face to face in dialogue with people of other faith traditions and, on the other hand, going forward together with them side by side in working for the common good and in witnessing to God. This apt classification can be taken even further to make a point with which Benedict XVI himself was clearly in sympathy. The two “dimensions” of face to face and side by side obviously also apply when it comes to thinking about faith and communicating faith; but here, in particular, yet another “dimension” comes into consideration. It is helpful, even necessary from time to time, to find occasions when believers—reflecting on their encounter with others and their common effort with them—explore their experience of interreligious dialogue and cooperation in light of their own confessional traditions alone with their own brothers and sisters in faith. The aim of such reflection with those of one’s own faith is to be able with new clarity to enter again into face to face encounters and side by side cooperations with those of other faiths. If one wants a name for this third dimension, one might say that confessional religious education and confessional theology offer times and places for the “back to back” dimension.⁴⁵

(2) *Searching for truth while deeply rooted in one’s faith*

Benedict’s 2012 Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* devotes its longest section to interreligious dialogue, explicitly using that expression.⁴⁶ Here, the Pope exploits the productive ambiguity of the French expression *l’autre croyant* (19). The expression can of course mean “a person who believes in another way”, but it can suggest as well a deep commonality: *l’autre croyant* is also “the other believer”, the person who has, just as we have, a religious belief. From such a characterisation, we can return to Benedict’s reservations about interreligious dialogue. We noted a certain tension between the three ideas of the relevant section of his last pre-Christmas address:

(a) One should not bring the central contents of one’s own faith into a conversation with the other believer, since one cannot move away from them.

(b) Since faith is not based on an arbitrary decision, but on truth, interreligious dialogue that addresses fundamental questions of being human can only be a further approach to truth: together we are on the

43 Letter from the State Secretariat dated 19 November 2007 N. 7311/07/RS: “With a view to encouraging your praiseworthy initiative, I am pleased to communicate that His Holiness would be most willing to receive Your Royal Highness and a restricted group of signatories of the open letter, chosen by you. At the same time, a working meeting could be organised between your delegation and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, with the cooperation of some specialised Pontifical Institutes (such as the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies and the Pontifical Gregorian University).”

44 http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_altre-religioni.html (accessed 20 May 2023). By using the category of “dimensions” here, Benedict is not introducing a new terminology which is intended to replace other concepts; in fact, in the same text, he once uses the word “aspect” instead of “dimension”, and in his last pre-Christmas address, he uses “dimension” where earlier ecclesial texts refer to “form” and “level” (e.g., see *Dialogue and Mission*, ns. 28,31).

45 Cf., Felix Körner, “Rücken an Rücken. Die dritte Dimension interreligiöser Miteinanders,” George Augustin, Sonja Sailer-Pfister, Klaus Vellguth (eds.), *Christentum im Dialog. Perspektiven christlicher Identität in einer pluralen Gesellschaft*. Festschrift Günter Riße (Theologie im Dialog, vol. 12), Herder, Freiburg 2014, 235–242.

46 Nn 19–28. Among other points in this text, Benedict writes as follows: “Jews, Christians and Muslims alike believe in one God, the Creator of all men and women. May Jews, Christians and Muslims rediscover one of God’s desires, that of the unity and harmony of the human family. May Jews, Christians and Muslims find in *other believers* brothers and sisters to be respected and loved, and in this way, beginning in their own lands, give the beautiful witness of serenity and concord between the children of Abraham” (n° 19, the original French uses the singular: “découvrir dans *l’autre croyant* un frère à respecter et à aimer”—italics in the original and in the translations). https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20120914_ecclesia-in-medio-orient.html (accessed 20 May 2023).

pilgrimage to truth.

(c) Since Christ—being himself the truth—takes his believers by the hand, one can confidently set out on the risky path of further truth-seeking: one will not lose one's faith on that journey if only one does not let go of Christ.

Three reflections may be offered to build upon the thought of Benedict XVI:

(a) Interreligious dialogue does not have to mean striving to find agreement in faith, nor do we have to assume that the participants in dialogue all basically want to express the same faith. Interreligious dialogue is not a version of ecumenism. Rather, in matters of faith, one can also come to the common understanding that we hold fundamentally divergent views. We can agree to disagree. Christianity and Islam are two different religions.⁴⁷ Surprisingly, our disagreement can even go so far, that we do not agree on whether or not we disagree. Many Muslims would claim that we are not only trying to worship the same God but we are actually doing so in reality, although we sometimes say divergent things about God. Christians can agree on that; but Muslims would normally go further and say that as long as Christians do not misunderstand their belief polytheistically, we are in dogmatic agreement and only differ in minor issues of devotional style. In that case we would not even agree to disagree; but we can live with that disagreement on disagreement, and discuss it further.

So, where precisely is the theological disagreement? The foundational difference is that Christianity, as opposed to Islam, acknowledges Jesus Christ as the definitive and defining turning point of world history, from which all consequences for theology, faith and life should proceed.

(b) Probably the most productive theological discussions are those with “other believers”, namely, with people who believe truly differently, but also seek the truth, that is, who seek to better know the one true God. In such discussions one may come to understand that one should abandon convictions so far held because one now realises that they contained a misunderstanding. Painful purification can thus take place. In such discussions, one may also find surprising new understanding of God's wisdom and will. In which case, fruitful enrichment can take place.

(c) If one dares in Christian–Muslim dialogue to go beyond the “concrete problems of coexistence” (as Benedict said just before Christmas 2012) and touches on the central contents of faith in a fair, scholarly discussion, then it is indeed not guaranteed that one will remain with one's previous acknowledgment of truth, and consequently one's view of faith. One's belief can change fundamentally. Indeed, conversion is possible. Countless people undergo the experience of a confessional change: a conversion from one religion to another. When Benedict XVI assured his listeners that Christ would not abandon his believers on their risky journeys of seeking the truth, he obviously wanted to encourage them, drawing on his conviction that Christ himself is the truth and therefore every increase in knowledge means coming closer to Christ. Of course, one only speaks in this way if, as a believer, one does not step outside the perspective of the Christian faith, if one does not, at least tentatively, take on the perspective of those who do not share this faith or of those who even deny it. No one is obliged to try out this tentative change of perspective. However, it is precisely this reflection on Benedict's presuppositions – that Christians can decide not to consider their faith from the perspective of others, and can be encouraged to have confidence in Christ's saving hand – that makes visible the dynamics of trust inherent in the act of believing. Is the Christian faith, we must ask, really the Christian's own choice of identity? A Christian might rather say something like this: I was seized by Christ (cf., Phil 3:12); so it is his choice to which I am now able to entrust myself.

By characterising persons of other faiths as other believers (*l'autre croyant*) and by encouraging Christians to search for truth since it is a further search for Christ, Benedict has in his own way prepared a way for a genuinely theological interaction of religions.

(3) *Asking fundamental questions about dialogue*

A posthumously published collection of essays by Benedict XVI has made available for the first time a short piece on Christian–Muslim dialogue, about which, once again, Benedict expresses fundamental

47 This is also the basic thesis of Felix Körner, *Kirche im Angesicht des Islam. Theologie des interreligiösen Zeugnisses*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2008.

reservations.⁴⁸ This time, his criticism focuses on scripture. Christian–Muslim dialogue, he says, does not only lack detailed knowledge of the Qur’ān and the Bible; rather, it ignores the essential difference between the two scriptures. Christian–Muslim dialogue is fundamentally misconceived when the Qur’ān and the Bible are compared by placing verses from each of them alongside each other and then, as one might expect, one finds “good and bad” in both scriptures.

Benedict XVI objects to this approach by emphasizing the two radically different understandings of revelation. It is indeed the case (here going beyond what Benedict himself writes) that in the case of the Qur’ān, the whole text came from the mouth of a single prophet and each of its statements, taken in an isolated manner, is invested by Muslims with divine authority. Those who do not submit to the claim of a scripture’s revealed status—and only they—can now label individual words of that scripture as good and bad. Benedict goes on to say that the Bible, on the other hand, can only be interpreted as a whole. The words of the many books which it contains, emerging out of a thousand-year process, can only be understood in view of the whole journey to which the Bible bears witness. To single out individual verses, or even to claim that one verse is good and one is bad, would not be an appropriate interpretation of the Bible. Adequate interpretation of Holy Scripture must see the Bible’s integral testimony. From the Christian perspective, this testimony only comes to light as a whole when the writings of Israel are seen as “Old Testament” in the light of the New. However, this history of understanding was interrupted at one point in Church history. The Reformation wanted to turn Christianity into a book religion, which picks out individual words from its scriptures. Luther’s *sola scriptura* transformed the overall biblical hermeneutic into literalism.

This very short essay, Benedict’s last piece of theological writing on Islam, was completed on 1 March 2018.⁴⁹ At that time, the author was already over 90 years old but was still capable of great intellectual constructions. However, since another faith tradition is implicated here, one should at least emphasise two points.

(1) As in the Bible, so also in the Qur’ān there are changing contexts relevant to its interpretation, as well as new references to earlier statements within it. There is also one overall message—the call to worship the one God. Although each Qur’ānic word has (so to speak) ‘sacramental’ value as a mediation of God’s nearness, its semantic value cannot be isolated from the whole of the Qur’ān..

(2) Luther’s Reformation stands in the tradition of the preceding interpretations of Scripture in the Church; he does not isolate the reading of the Bible from other ecclesiastical practices and emphasizes the meaning of Scripture as one overall statement: the promise of salvation through Christ, communicated by the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments.

But my point here is not to correct the reflections of a pope who has passed on. Helpful lessons can, rather, be learned from Benedict XVI’s thoughts on Islam as well. First of all, it should be recalled that Benedict XVI’s contribution to the history of Christian dialogue with Islam has been to emphasize the need for “reflection.” That is, in interfaith dialogue, theological reflection should indeed take place: in the face of the other, with the other; and of course also about each other. We need sharp thinking and clear speaking, but never without that “that initial goodwill without which there can be no understanding”.⁵⁰ Pope Benedict had fundamental reservations about a theological dialogue with Islam. They appeared as weighty thoughts and occasionally in heavy formulations; but they neither end nor overburden the conversation. On the contrary, the Pope of “reflection” pointed out unresolved issues in interreligious dialogue and thus offered opportunities for theological clarification and development.

48 “Il dialogo cristiano-islamico” in *Che cos’ è il Cristianesimo? Quasi un testamento spirituale*. A cura di Elio Guerriero e Georg Gänswein. Mondadori: Milan, 2023, 36–38. This collection will not come out in German for the time being. The reason for this is given in the following quotation of Benedict provided in the preface by editor Elio Guerriero: “Da parte mia, in vita, non voglio più pubblicare nulla. La furia dei circoli a me contrari in Germania è talmente forte che l’apparizione di ogni mia parola subito provoca da parte loro un vociare assassino.” [For my part, I no longer wish to publish anything in the rest of my life. The fury of the circles against me in Germany is so strong that the appearance of my every word immediately provokes a murderous hubbub on their part.] I hope that the critique of this essay that I offer would not have been regarded by the late Pope as an example of “vociare assassino”.

49 Endnote (a) to the chapter.

50 Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (Translated from the German by Adrian J. Walker), Image, New York, 2007), xxiv; the German original speaks of a “Vorschuss an Sympathie, ohne den es kein Verstehen gibt”, Joseph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI., *Jesus von Nazareth. Erster Teil. Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verklärung*, Herder, Freiburg 2008, 22.

Conclusion

We have considered a number of events in the life of Benedict XVI concerning Islam, as well as some relevant speeches and writings. Although we might be tempted to diagnose in him a fundamental fear of otherness, a fear of identity loss, we should not give in to that temptation to psychologize. Our approach, consequently, has not been psychological but theological. Prompted by this theological approach to ask the question “What now?”, we conclude this paper with a theologically oriented future perspective.

Encounters with others produce, on both sides, “purification and enrichment”. This pairing of words goes back, as we saw, to the 1984 document *Dialogue and Mission* but has come to be associated with Benedict XVI.⁵¹ This is a fortunate association. In conversation with Joseph Ratzinger, a thinker whose early research focused on the theology of history, we can provide the doctrinal foundation of the affirmation that interreligious encounters, even if they are difficult, can cause purification and enrichment in faith. That doctrinal foundation is the belief that *God is at work in history*. With this attitude in mind, we can hear anew Benedict’s statement that Christ will not abandon us when we venture into the ocean of new questions. Benedict’s assurance should not be taken to say that conversions are impossible; they can happen and do happen, in both directions. Benedict’s assurance can, however, be taken to encourage believers to venture into interreligious encounters, however risky they may be. It is indeed risky to experience the attractiveness of a different model of life, the persuasiveness of a different religious conviction. However, Benedict clearly wanted to send a message of encouragement to those who fear that they will lose their identity. To the same end, Pope Francis now uses the formula *il coraggio dell’alterità*: we need the courage of otherness.⁵² He expressly means two things when he says this: to dare to be perceived as different from others, even different from a surrounding majority; and to dare to talk and walk and work for the future of this world with people who have different convictions from our own. Indeed, we can together shape our communities and cultures, our countries and continents without agreeing in faith questions.

From my present perspective, in Berlin, I have an impression which I would like to share in conclusion. Both the fear that we might lose our identity, and the encouragement to venture into the risky ocean of encounter have important consequences for places like PISAI and the Gregorian, which Benedict XVI mentioned in the official response to *A Common Word*. I believe that the Gregorian and PISAI should grow to be laboratories⁵³ where collaboration with Muslim thinkers and students becomes more natural for staff and students. There is exciting space beyond the study of texts and even beyond comparative theology. These schools can now become places of interactive theology, of theological interaction, especially with the new generation of Muslim theologians in Europe today. Future leaders and teachers of the Church of course need resources for their own identity formation; but the more Muslim–Christian friendships grow within the ecclesiastical faculties, the more Rome can be a place which prepares future leaders and teachers to contribute to a world in which otherness is seen as an opportunity to be purified and enriched and to walk together towards—and work together for—the construction of the “city of humanity,”⁵⁴ the civilisation of friends in difference.

51 Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n° 250.

52 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170428_egitto-conferenza-pace.html (accessed 21 May 2023); the official English translation is reductive when it renders this as “the courage to accept difference”.

53 *Veritatis gaudium*, 3.

54 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170428_egitto-conferenza-pace.html (accessed 22 May 2023), the English “city of man” uses the singular where the original Italian has the plural: “città degli uomini.”