

Felix Körner, S.J.

# Intra-religious Dialogue

## How a Faith Tradition Can Rediscover Its Unity

Thank you for the invitation to share these moments of *pakighinabi* with you. Last week, I spoke to Catholic theologians at the Redemptorists' Davao theologate called SATMI (St. Alphonsus Theological & Mission Institute); my lecture was on inter-religious dialogue. Now, Fr. Joel Tabora and his co-workers at Al Qalam Institute for Islamic Identities and Dialogue in Southeast Asia invited me to speak on intra-religious dialogue. Some of my Muslim friends, in my home country, but also elsewhere, in Indonesia, Syria and Turkey, for example, have shared their pain with me about Islam's lack of inner unity. Now, as a German, and as a Christian, I am also looking back to a history of religious divisions. In Europe, processes of reconciliation have become fruitful in the last years. Coming from there, I have prepared ten theses. Afterwards, you may discuss my theses. I hope that my experience, research and reflection may be an inspiring contribution for a helpful afternoon, although I am an outsider—or maybe, *because* I am an outsider: helpful, I hope, for each one of you, for the communities you represent, and also for myself; and since in the discussion you will speak about your past experience and future hopes, today's encounter may also be helpful on the inter-religious level. That is my hope and prayer this afternoon.

### 1 Healing memory

#### **Thesis: Reconciliation requires “healing of memory.”**

500 years ago, Western Christendom fell apart. Martin Luther's “Reformation” was meant to renew Christianity. He and other Reformers wanted to return to the loving, convincing, Gospel-shaped beginnings of the Church. The outcome of that attempt to renew the Church, however, was to split the Church: Catholics over against Protestants. In my home country both groups are equally strong in numbers and influence. Last year, they wrote an impressive text together. We do not want to “celebrate” the Reformation, because it had regrettable effects: loss of unity, loss of credibility—and indeed loss of many lives. We do not want to celebrate the Reformation, but it is an important anniversary. So together, we found the formula that we “*commemorate* the Reformation.” The 2016 document proposes a long-tested methodology called the “healing of memory.” This title refers to two things at the same time.

- First we are all, even after 500 years, still carrying wounds in our memories which need healing: “healing of memory” means “let our memories find healing.”
- Second, however, also: memory is the way for the future: “healing of memory” means “healing by digesting the past.” Memory, remembering is important for the process of our healing.

So, the point is not “let us simply forget what has happened.” One cannot decide to forget, anyway; likewise, forgiving is not an option, it is a process. The whole world was able to learn from South Africa after apartheid. It is from Nelson Mandela's wisdom that we learned the methodology called the “healing of memory.” We will only get lasting peace if we dare to look at what happened, what was done, by whom; not in order to cut new wounds but in order to allow the old ones to heal. Two former enemies were able to prepare this year's “commemoration” together. In that process, they had three insights.

- We cannot get rid of the scars; but healing means: to arrive at a time when the scars do not hurt any more.
- We cannot change the past; but we can change the effects the past has on us.
- And: we need not tell two conflicting stories. We were, rather, finally able to tell the story of our separation together.

These are three insights of humility and maturity. How come that century-old enemies were suddenly able to get reconciled? That brings us to our next three theses. They all have to do with memory.

### 2 Europe: continent of war?

What made such a historic reconciliation possible? The first answer is terrible:

#### **Thesis: Reconciliation grew out of the horrors of wars.**

The continent that seemed to be the homeland of Christendom had become the homeland of wars. Nations that were traditionally Christian were brutally fighting against each other. After 1945, however, there was a shared will for reconciliation among the nations and within the one Christian religion. How? Here, I want to mention three factors that refer especially to my own nation, to Germany.

**Trenches** In the battle fields, soldiers feared together, fought together and died together, Catholics and Protestants: and they saw the reliability of the comrade, the humanity of that other guy, indeed often also the patriotism and the faith of that member of that other denomination. Before the World Wars, many Germans did not have any contact with the other Christian group. Catholics had thought the other cannot be a real believer and Protestants had thought the other cannot be a real German.

**Migration** After World War II, millions of Germans lost their homes in the East of Europe and had to flee to Germany's West. Formerly separated denominational groups were now forced to live together; churches of the "other" were now built, mentalities of the "other" were now visible. Suddenly, Germans had to get used to living in areas with almost equal numbers of Protestants and Catholics.

**Responsibility** The most horrible war, World War II, was started by Germany. We acknowledge that we are carrying heavy guilt and that we have caused in the years until 1945 more than 12 million deaths, in concentration camps, in armed combat, and even in people's homes. You might say that I am not responsible of that because I was born almost 20 years after the war; but we say, and I think that is exactly right: today's Germans are in fact responsible of that. I am not saying "I am guilty of the Nazi crimes" but I am responsible; responsible in two senses:

- I and my fellow Germans today are responsible in front of those victims who only now come and ask for recognition of their suffering, like the thousands of prisoners of war who are still alive and were exploited, abused, de-humanised by Germans.
- Second, I and my co-nationals are responsible for the future: we have to educate people to overcome prejudice and polarisation, we have to unmask and denounce selfish nationalism, totalitarianism, tribalism and racism.

The painful post-war repentance gave us a new sense of responsibility. That also opened the doors to another view on the role of our faith in today's world.

### 3 For all humanity

The unprecedented sufferings, traumas, deaths, and the continuing threat to global peace after World War II changed the priorities in many Christians, including their theologians and leaders. The nuclear menace and the cries of millions of hungry and unfree people put the former inner-Christian quarrels about doctrine into a different light. We Christians started asking ourselves whether we had no other things to say and show to the world. Are we, the followers of Christ, King of Peace, only another group of infighters? Do we not have, in the Good News that God is the Father of all, a great message urgently needed today? Can we, as the one Church that overcomes old discord not become a light of hope, an example of reconciliation for other conflicts? Suddenly, we Christians felt that we had lost time and energy in condemning the belief of a fellow Christian, rather than seeing in it an enriching perspective on our common faith. Our fellow human beings' cries for help made us understand that we Christians can actually work together and grow into what we were meant to be from the beginning as one great faith community: the leaven, enzyme, catalyst of humanity's unification.

Already some decades before World War II, some Christians had tried to uncover an old idea that, however, had not found much resonance among Catholic leaders first: the coming together, the growing together of the long separated Christian communities. The project's name re-awakened a Greek term of the early Christian self-understanding. The term translates "all humanity": *oikoumenē*. That is the origin of the words "ecumenical" and "ecumenism": intra-religious dialogue. In the face of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's horrors, Christians had finally rediscovered that they have greater challenges than keeping their profile clear of their fellow Christians. Our responsibility in a world in which many resort to the quick solution, must be a testimony of patient work for unity rather than an emotional condemnation of the other. Therefore my third thesis:

**Thesis: The sense of unity grows within a religion if it feels how its origins call it to responsibility in today's world.**

Responsibility also means that we believers have to respond to the questions and needs of the people around us. We are losing time and credibility, we are losing lives if we focus on how wrong the other is and how right I am. Precision in faith questions is important; but it also requires precision in under-

standing what Christians from other traditions are really saying. If we can speak again as believers who understand each other, we can be responsible: we can speak with one voice and respond to the questions, desires and needs of our young. Only then we can transmit our faith's meaningful message to them.

#### 4 Identity in sensibility

When I look at young clergy in today's Europe and then at the now old priests, I presently see less enthusiasm for dialogue with others. For some incoming European Church leaders, the most important concern seems to be "our own side." Why is that so? Well, for one, the memories of the War are fading, and people forget what we were able to learn from it; but there is another reason: today, many Christians see their identity in danger.

This is the identity trap! Because the many options of modern life seem to challenge us to clarify our own identity. Now the quick answer becomes attractive, a magic formula, the "safe way to your safe profile," a short definition. The problem is that a real identity lives without a self-definition. It requires patience and sensibility, because one cannot put it in words: identity needs to be experienced. How can we experience it? First,

- in a life of reading and learning, discussion and reflection we sense our tradition's growth in history and its place in history; and I sense that my own story and future are shaped from many sources, religious and cultural ones—in other words: I can experience my identity in an ever continued education; that also leads me to a second source: we can experience our identity
- in prayer life, when we sense that God has a call for us, a future for us—thus, out of joyful gratitude our hearts will be shaped; and from there,
- in our active life, by serving God and our fellow creatures and now sense the confirmation: "yes, that is our call from God, that is who we are really meant to be."

Texts, signs, vestments, rituals, prohibitions: all those can be helps in living my particular identity; but those exterior markers must not come from my individual decision and must not lead to my self-distinction over against other believers, whom I want to consider as less pious than myself. We cannot use such markers as if they were an identity technology, a tool against the culture we reject. Rather, we can only receive such traditions and thus enter into the mutual process of transformation: we are being transformed by our religious culture and thus we will also develop it further. It is tempting to let our identity be designed by modern standards of visibility, performance and success. If I let my identity symbols be dictated by someone's simple formula, what I will have is yet another brand on the global market—a religion like *Nike* or *Apple*, rather than a living tradition.

**Thesis: Believers will not be attracted by simplistic offers of self-definition or self-demarcation, if they come to sense their identity in learning, praying and serving.**

#### 5 Fullness still ahead

When a Protestant in Germany becomes a Catholic, some of my fellow Catholics comment: finally he understood where the only true Church is. That is actually not the attitude of Jesus. If we have the sense of Christ, we know that our own faith community is not yet what it is meant to be.

**Thesis: Acknowledging that my own faith community is not yet perfect opens me to acknowledging the other.**

Many have heard of the great worldwide renewal process with its events and texts of 1963–1965, the "Second Vatican Council" also known as "Vatican II." Until Vatican II, we Catholics said that the only ecumenism is the ecumenism of return; in other words: there is no other way to Church unity—the others have to come back to us. Now we know, this is wrong. Ecumenism, finding together, is not looking back but forward. None of us was perfect in the past, none of us is perfect now; but in this process of coming ever more together we can all heal. That is also why the reunification of separate communities from the same religion is not a compromise. It is, rather, becoming more completely what we are meant to be: in richness, tolerance and the joy of a growing integration; joy also about the other. That brings us to the next thesis.

## 6 The gift of the other

The opening of the Reformations's commemorations happened in Lund, in Sweden. It came as a big surprise that there was a special Catholic guest: Pope Francis was there. On that occasion he said something remarkable. Actually he did not simply say it, he prayed it: "O Holy Spirit: help us to rejoice in the gifts that have come to the Church through the Reformation." We can see the individual religious other as a gift; we can see this other tradition of our own faith as a gift, and we can even see that God's wisdom has brought good things out of that what we felt, for centuries, to be only the source of disunity.

**Thesis: The other is a gift we can rejoice in—the person who lives a competing tradition, but also that other community, that other style of living our faith.**

The new interest in the Bible, hymns in peoples' own languages, a good preaching, well-educated clergy, and even the humility we all gained in seeing that we ourselves cannot bring about our intra-religious unity: all those effects of the Reformation are gifts which we can now cherish as signs of God's generosity, God's way of purifying us, God's challenging us, God's gifting us.

Beyond this joyful tone, however, more is to be learned from the demanding inspiration of the present Pope, Francis:

## 7 The pain of the other

In 2014, the Pope travelled to Jerusalem and met the Grand Mufti Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḥusayn there. In the holy city, he also said something remarkable. To sense its challenge you have to imagine that everything expressed on that occasion was to be heard also on the background of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Francis called out: "Let us learn to understand the pain of the other." That must be my seventh message!

**Thesis: We must learn to understand the pain of the other, too.**

In the Holy Land, the two conflicting parties cannot tell their history together. They will both say: we are the victims of humanity's most inhumane suffering; the whole world is siding with our enemy; we want peace but the others frustrate every attempt to live together; because of their unreliability a serious dialogue is impossible. Both will say all this. And both have good reasons. Any advancement is blocked, any solution is deadlocked. In this context, and to all of us, Francis gives this risky direction: dare to sense what the other has gone through.

What good can come out of that? You will be a greater human being. You will not be blinded by small-minded jealousy; as if the other was so privileged and you were the real loser! You will be opened to new ideas, to constructive proposals, to a new vision of what real life is: it is, first of all, not that the other has to disappear. The other will be around; and, yes, that is not easy.

## 8 Differentiated Consensus

Now, so far, my theses sounded like the proposals of a mediator who comes from outside, they sounded pragmatic and as if the faith contents of the religious traditions played no role in solving the conflict. But I am a theologian, and I do think that the teaching of my faith tradition, my religious community is true. Therefore, I will also show you the method Protestants and Catholics use when they write documents of agreement in the hard questions of foundational teaching.

**Thesis: In an agreement, the concern of the other must be expressed.**

If we want to reach unity, our best experts, our greatest faith teachers must come together, too; and that is what has been happening between Catholics and Protestants (I keep using this example). These Christian specialists produce texts. They are documents of outstanding quality. That is so because they follow an excellent methodology. It is called "Differentiated Consensus." It does not mean they formulate a compromise. In our most existential themes, we do not want compromise. To avoid this, the method of "Differentiated Consensus" was developed. It proceeds in three steps.

- First, both parties say how they can express a central faith question in wording that is acceptable for both. After all, we both belong to the same religion. So that must be possible; but that is not enough.
- Then, each party expresses why they have a different tradition in speaking about this question, why they set different accents, utter different pre-occupations, underline the importance of their profile: they write down their particular "concerns."

- Finally, after listening to the others' concerns and listing them in the document, both parties again write together, declaring that those concerns do not cancel the common formula found at the beginning.

A dialogue that follows this rule will often take different rounds until the right expression is found for the common faith formula. Once found, however, it is a solid basis for the future. It is so strong for three reasons. It understands that

- unity is not uniformity;
- our faith has always had room for variance, cultural differences, for a certain plurality;
- we can distinguish between essential belief, and contrasting perspectives on it.

## 9 Face – side – back

Is there a lifestyle in which a lasting co-existence can grow? My formula is the following.

**Thesis: Living together in mutual understanding flourishes when we have moments of face-to-face, of side-by-side, and of back-to-back.**

We need to sit together, to talk about our past, to hear the pain of the other, to listen to the others' differing understanding and practice, to go through the story of our separation, to allow the memory heal us and to rejoice in the gift of the other. That is the "face to face." Apart from that, we also need other moments of togetherness: we need to work in a common project. First of all, as faith communities, this is, of course, shaping this world together in the way that is inspired by our common faith—especially, passing our faith on to the young. Also, charity work is a great ground for such coming together; but sometimes the task can be much simpler. Psychologists recount stories where conflicting youth groups were brought to a summer camp and till the last day the discussions lead to no agreement. When they left, rather disappointed, their bus had a puncture. Suddenly, all had to work together, and suddenly they felt who the others' talents were urgently needed: working "side by side." This dimension also comes in when we speak together to outsiders, or the society, to the world—it is good to have one voice, then. Finally, it is an all-changing experience when we can stand as one united community before our Lord: when we can pray together.

With the "face to face" and the "side by side" experience always in our hearts, we can, thirdly, have times of "back to back." There will be things we do not do together: we may have different liturgies or different teaching sessions. It is a sign of trust that we allow the others to have their space for themselves. In Turkish, "the one standing back to back with me" is *arkadaş*—that is the word for "friend." You trust your friend back there, although you do not see him; but together, you have the full-circle perspective.

## 10 Islam's own resources

The Second Vatican Council showed why Christians should be in favour of freedom in questions of religion. This is no lack of conviction of our faith; quite to the contrary. Freedom of religion is, rather, religious freedom: it follows from our faith. We promote a state that leaves its citizens free to choose their religious beliefs, or not to believe, or not to choose. Why does that follow from our faith? Faith is a willing, loving "yes" to God—and as such, it requires the space of freedom in which such a truly loving "yes" can be given.

So far, I have spoken out of Christian experience, indeed as a Christian theologian. As a person grateful for having found many Muslim friends, I might also give some hints at Islam's own traditions of Muslim–Muslim understanding and unity-in-diversity. I mention nine points leading to the last, my tenth, thesis.

- 1 The Koran's fundamental intention is to call everyone to conversion to the one and only God. So, the Koran speaks to free persons, free to take their own life decisions.
- 2 The Koran's vision of the Muslims is for them to be the "middle community" and thus God's "witnesses to all human beings" (*šuhadā'* *alā n-nās*, al-Baqara 2:143).
- 3 The Koran is, however, well aware of the dangers of disunity. Its way of dealing with quarrels in faith questions is to remind the dissenters of their common ground. In the Koran itself, that refers to Jews and Christians (Āl 'Imrān 3:64) but the principle holds for inner-Islamic quarrelling as well: agree on what is your common ground but do not strive for uniformity!
- 4 Inner-Islamic dissent in questions of belief was, from early on, mixed with struggles for political power. Every generation has to uncover the politics behind doctrine.

- 5 An old Islamic motto says that salvation is in the community (*ḡamā'a*). That word can be a good orientation, because it might mean, not only “in the group, over against the individual” or “in the big group, rather than in some sect,” but also: that the way to paradise is to go “in harmony.”
  - 6 What the early rulers normally avoided was to declare dissenting Muslims to be unbelievers (*takfir*: mark out as *kuffār*). They did not want to get obliged to start a religious war against them.
  - 7 The classical Sunni rule to have four different legal schools (*madāhib*) active in the same place is a model of visible unity in diversity.
  - 8 Today, we remember the due respect the 2004 *‘Ammān Message* and its concrete “Three Points” of the following year found on the side of both Muslims and non-Muslims ([www.ammanmessage.com](http://www.ammanmessage.com)).
  - 9 The *Marrakesh Declaration* of 2016 had many Muslim groups speak with one voice, jointly commemorating an event, here, celebrating 1400 years since the Charter of Medina and accepting the concept of citizenship as basis for each person’s rights ([www.marrakeshdeclaration.org](http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org)).
- Consequently, my tenth and final thesis must be:

**Thesis: The Muslim *umma* is meant as a testimony for all humanity; Islam’s foundation, tradition and presence has its own resources for intra-religious harmony.**

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#### **Talking points:**

**Beyond enmity.** When did I feel that the other is not our enemy but a fellow believer?

**Needed together.** Which responsibility do we have, as one religion, in our region, our country, our world today?

**The other’s pain.** Can I already feel that members of other groups of my religion have suffered from what we have done to them?

#### **Reflection:**

**Society and Politics.** What are the root causes for radicalisation, tribalism and group hatred?

**Formation.** How must religious education change so that conflicts within my own religion end?

Consider that it is never enough to just tell the young what they should do. Which reasons, motivations, examples, spaces for healing experience can we provide?