



JUBILO

CONFLICT PREVENTION, ETHNIC INTEGRATION AND PEACE BUILDING
THROUGH INTERFAITH DIALOGUE



INTERNATIONAL LAUNCH CONFERENCE

PROCEEDINGS



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THE JUBILO PROJECT

A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO
JEWISH, CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC REALITIES
IS AN ONGOING ASSIGNMENT UNDER THE
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OF THE INTERNATIONAL LAUNCH CONFERENCE

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C O N T E N T S



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MARNIX NORDER

Deputy Mayor, City of The Hague, Netherlands

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,
I consider it a great honour to welcome you here today at the launch of the *Jubilo* project. First of all, welcome to our city, The Hague. The city which is home to the Spanda Foundation, the organisation that initiated the *Jubilo* project. I am also pleased to see such a distinguished and eminent company present here today. You are present here today to see the launch of this important project and by being here you are giving the project your support.

The local authority of The Hague is organising this project together with the Spanda Foundation and this project has my heartfelt support. I am not just being polite when I say this. I sincerely mean it.

I want to tell you why I think the *Jubilo* project is so very important.

What is *Jubilo's* goal? *Jubilo* is a project that is designed to promote dialogue between religions. In the first place it's about the dialogue between the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

A dialogue that occurs in an open, respectful and tolerant way. A dialogue aimed to further dialogue with other religions, but also to promote ethnic integration, peace and democracy and to prevent conflicts. The key words in my mind are: respect, tolerance and openness.

Why are projects like these so desperately needed?

You will have noticed that our society is coming under increasing threat from intolerance and fanaticism. Certainly when it comes to the dialogue between religions and the debates about them. More and more public debates and cultural expressions are being pressurised by those who do not agree with their purpose or content. In fact it has become quite usual, primarily through the media, to challenge freedom of expression in whatever way. Plenty of examples of this can be found in our daily news reports.

At this time our society is involved in a struggle against all kinds of ideologies whose representatives believe that our freedom of expression can be challenged. By my standards the freedom of expression of every human being is the

mother of all freedoms. Curtail that freedom, and the other freedoms of the ordinary person will soon follow. I don't think I need to be explicit here with ghastly examples from world history.

That is one of the main reasons why this *Jubilo* project is so important! If our society is to take a stand against the threat to our greatest freedom, the freedom of expression, then we need a debate and a dialogue, like the one *Jubilo* is promoting.

First of all, because it is in a dialogue between the different religions that it will rapidly become apparent, if it isn't apparent already, that the freedom of mankind, of the believer, is a common denominator of these religions. The struggle for freedom and the fight against injustice lie at the root of each religion. If we look beyond the rituals and the customs of the various religions – no matter how important they are to the adherents – we discover that the freedom of the individual is the intrinsic force of every religion.

Jointly seeking the common ground between the different religions in a respectful, open and tolerant way points us in the direction of freedom, respect for each other and each other's customs in an increasingly global society.

What we also need is a dialogue, like the one intended by the *Jubilo* project, to determine together what we can and cannot say about each other and each other's religion, with mutual respect. It is not the law that should decide this. We should decide this together, in a dialogue with all the religions. We need to know, and let it be known, what is the responsible and sensible thing to do, or not to do, in a world where people from different cultures live close together.

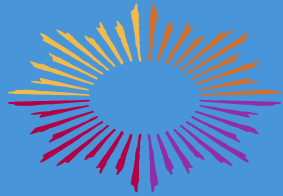
Through debate and dialogue with each other we will be able to withstand those who seek to threaten our freedoms. We will be able to offer many people the prospect of a peaceful and tolerant world, in which we can live together with mutual respect for each other.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope I have made it clear why I am such a keen supporter of the *Jubilo* project. I should add that it is not just because of the more philosophical reasons I have just mentioned. In our city, as in all other major cities, dozens of nationalities live together in a relatively small space. We as the governors of the city have a great need for pragmatic results from the dialogue you propose between the different religions. Because it is in that city that we have to be able to live together in freedom with respect for each other and each other's religions.

Thank you for listening and I wish you a fruitful symposium.

And all the best for the launch
of the *Jubilo* project!





JUBILO

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE
CONFLICT PREVENTION
ETHNIC INTEGRATION
PEACE BUILDING



PEACE AND RELIGIOUS PLURIFORMITY



ANTON C. ZIJDERVELD

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RELIGIOUS PLURIFORMITY – I.E. THE EXISTENCE OF VARIOUS, THEOLOGICALLY DIFFERENT religions in one social and political context – can, and often has been, the source of great discord and even war. So, ‘peace and religious pluriformity’ is not a subject that is taken for granted.

For different religions to live in harmony and peace some clear cut *preconditions* are needed. In view of the limited time allotted, I shall restrict myself to two such conditions. The first one is political and of a structural nature. The second is cultural and of a socio-psychological, mental nature.

One further preliminary remark: I discuss the situation of Western democratic societies in which exists the rule of law and the separation of church (temple, mosque) and state.

The first political and structural precondition of peace and religious pluriformity is this (the separation of church and state). It is adamant that people with different religious convictions are able to worship, and in particular to educate their children within the frame of reference of their faith – as long as this is in agreement with the the constitution and its laws, and with the international Declaration of Human Rights. Within this democratic frame of reference people must be able and be enabled to construct and maintain a *civil society*, that is an environment in which they can exercise their liberty within their own institutions. This includes, of course, the religious institutions such as the church, the temple and the mosque, but also the institutions founded upon their religious worldview – the educational institutions in the first place, from primary schools to universities. But also the institutions of communication such as broadcasting corporations, newspapers and other media, political parties, workers’ unions and such. Some may even want their very own sports clubs. In the Netherlands we have such arrangements and call it ‘pillarization’ (*verzuiling*). The aim of this pillarization has not been *apartheid*, separation, as liberals and socialists often claim. On the contrary, it was meant to promote the integration of minorities in society and the body politic. Having acquired power, the institutions of the minorities were able to integrate without losing their autonomy



CARL W. ERNST

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and their religious individuality (idiosyncrasy implies strangeness and usually used in reference to people not collectives). At present, a small (as of yet) Islamic pillar is emerging. It started with Islamic primary schools, and now there is an Islamic University which is in the process of being accredited by the Dutch government. Speaking about pluriformity, there are, incidentally, two catholic and two orthodox-protestant universities and since the 1980's even a Humanistic University.

But there is also the cultural and socio-psychological precondition necessary in order to promote a peaceful religious pluriformity. This is first and foremost *mutual respect*, the civilized will *to agree to disagree*, the attitude and mentality *to tolerate ideas and lifestyle one does not agree with*. All of this, of course, within the context of a constitutional democracy which does not allow for any discrimination, in particular the discrimination of women, of homosexuals, and of people belonging to ethnic minorities. The civil society, in other words, should be a civilized society in which rights are tied to obligations. For example, the right of free speech is tied to the obligation to avoid hurting someone else's feelings. The right of free speech should not be understood as the right to insult people, to hurt wilfully their religious feelings. In a setting of religious pluriformity, peace and harmony are in need of mutual respect and tolerance, based upon the fundamental right of free speech. There is, of course, a lot to disagree about, but that then is expressed in an *open and public debate* in which rational arguments are exchanged, not emotional insults.

Democracy is a fragile system which can easily be abused and even destroyed.

Particularly in a situation of religious pluriformity we should be aware of this inherent fragility. Democracy is the most fruitful context for religious pluriformity, but this religious pluriformity in particular can contribute to the destruction of democracy. It is obvious that religious extremism is a great threat to democracy, but so is anti-religious extremism. Both are founded upon and fed by intolerance.

The great paradox of democracy is the question as to how tolerant one can be towards anti-democratic intolerance. History has taught us that religion is often the source of severe intolerance. Yet, in my view, religion could also be the force which promotes harmony, since most religions, in particular the three monotheistic religions, propagate the ideal of *justice* and *peace*.

Any idea of a Holy War against unbelievers is intolerable in a democratic context. It is, in my view, also intolerable within any truly religious context.



EVERY RELIGIOUS TRADITION IS CLAIMED BY ITS FOLLOWERS IN A RANGE OF IDENTIFICATIONS, from exclusivist – holding that we alone are correct, and all others are condemned – to more pluralistic perspectives, recognizing some legitimacy and worth in other traditions, and even universalist positions, such as the notion that all humans are destined for salvation¹. How does one's view of other religions affect the prospects for peace in this world? What are the reasons why people are drawn to exclusivist, pluralist, or universalist attitudes toward other religions? And how have these questions played out in Islamic thought?²

In attempting briefly to answer these questions, I approach the subject as a scholar of religious studies rather than as a representative of any particular community. I do this in the belief that religious studies scholars may act as brokers in discussions between faith communities, as W. C. Smith once suggested³.

I begin with the observation that war and conflict are in their very essence political, involving efforts at domination and conquest within, between, and among different societies, at the behest of political élites who control and claim to represent those societies. In my view it is scarcely possible to find examples of conflict and war based on exclusively religious reasons, if we define religion primarily as a matter of faith and practice centered on concrete communities, their life cycles, hopes, and prayers. Yet religion frequently is invoked as a justification for war and violence, legitimating the actions of empires, kingdoms, and other political formations. It may be that the authority inherent in the formulation of a religious outlook inevitably carries with it elements of a political insistence on adhering to a given concept of community.

Nevertheless, I do think we can distinguish the rhetorical use of religious language and symbols as a powerful tool to persuade and intimidate in the service of political power. That political use of religious language often involves the demonization of other religious groups as falling far outside the limits of toleration, and it can serve as a justification for devastating wars and genocide.

The great Arabic historical thinker Ibn Khaldun, in his analysis of the rise and fall of civilizations in the *Muqaddimah*, developed a striking account of the social characteristic that he called "group feeling" or '*asabiyyah*'. He found this group

feeling to exist most strongly in nomadic societies, which developed very strong bonds of kinship and community, due to the harsh environments where they live, which forced them to develop qualities of fierce loyalty to their own, and ruthless competition with others. Nomadic group feeling was so powerful, in Ibn Khaldun's view, that it was the chief factor leading to the overthrow of soft sedentary civilizations and the creation of new empires. He felt that this group feeling was especially strong when it was combined with religion in the form of prophecy.

4 While the historical samples on which Ibn Khaldun drew were somewhat limited from today's perspective, there are aspects of his analysis that remain relevant. It is noteworthy that, in modern Arabic and cognate languages (such as Persian and Turkish), *'asabiyya* is the standard equivalent used to translate the modern European term, fanaticism. That powerful word, fanaticism, was born in the crucible of the modern revolutions that gave birth to the nation-state and dismissed the traditional loyalty to religious authority as blind irrationality. Yet the condemnation of religious fanaticism was accompanied by a new kind of ferocious identity, nationalism, which accepted no other gods as legitimate, besides the nation. Where fanaticism and nationalism differ from Ibn Khaldun's group feeling is in the way these ideologies are promoted and maintained by media technologies, making possible "imagined communities," in Benedict Anderson's term⁵. What all these forms of group identity share is an exaltation of the group over ethical considerations in the treatment of others, making the authoritarian element of religion predominant.

Like other sacred books, the Qur'an does not speak. Its many and varied pronouncements must be sifted and selected by human beings who approach the text with their own questions and concerns. At times (49:13) it offers counsel stressing a universal notion of virtue: "People! We have created you from a male and female; and we have made you in confederacies and tribes so that you might come to know one another. The noblest among you in the eyes of God is the most pious, for God is omniscient and knowing." At the same time that the Qur'an praises the peoples of the book – Jews, Christians, and others – it also contains passages that criticize the other religious communities for failing to follow the revelations given to them, and for rejecting the teaching of the Qur'an itself.

Which of these emphases are modern Muslims called upon to heed? What factors will lead them to embrace the positive recognition of pluralism or to reject the possibility of community with those of other faiths?

There are abundant examples in the Islamic tradition of thinkers who have adopted a cosmopolitan stance toward other religions. Many of those thinkers can be associated with the tradition of philosophy or with Sufism, the teaching of spiritual and ethical ideals. The philosopher al-Farabi equated the Islamic caliph and

Imam with Plato's philosopher-king, but he insisted that all true philosophers are (in a Qur'anic phrase) "a single soul," and that it does not particularly matter which religion the prince of the ideal city professes. In the hands of Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi, and their followers, the Aristotelian-Platonic notion of wisdom was reshaped, so that religion was up classified under the categories of ethics and politics – philosophy adapted for the masses, as it were. Remarkable researches of a comparative character were carried out by al-Shahrastani and al-Biruni, investigating respectfully all of the known religions of the world. The religions of India, which conventionally should have been characterized as idolatry, were studied at length. The historian al-Mas'udi adapted the Qur'anic concept of the monotheistic Sabians – whom the Bible associates with the Queen of Sheba – to permit a sophisticated appreciation of the "pagan" monuments of the ancient world⁶. I lay particular stress on the Muslim encounter with the nominally pagan religions of India, since from the earliest Arab invasion of Sind (711), we find that Hindus and Buddhists were assimilated into the category of Peoples of the Book, perhaps even more successfully than were Zoroastrians in Persia (although pragmatic reasons may have predominated in the policy regarding the latter)⁷.

5 In a similar fashion, Sufi mystics in charting the immense inner landscapes of the soul seemed to have been alert to the Qur'anic notion that every people has been sent a Messenger. On the metaphysical plane, Ibn al-'Arabî and others meditated on the distinctive characteristics of each Prophet, and how it was that certain experiences of Jesus, for instance, explained the mentality and practices of his followers. In his poetry, Ibn 'Arabî described the heart of the illuminated knower of God as transcending the limitations of "the God created in the faiths," and as embracing the different manifestations by which God has appeared to humanity⁸.

The great Persian poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, writing during the 13th century in a society of Turkish Muslims and Greek Christians, expressed himself fully as a Muslim, but he pushed so far beyond the circles of the ego that his impact was clearly felt – and still is – across religious lines. An anecdote from one of his biographies will serve to illustrate his style, phrased in terms of the prophetic saying that there would eventually be seventy three conflicting religious sects.

The learned Siraj al-Din of Konya was the chief of charitable trusts, and a great man of his time, but he was not happy with Mawlana Rûmî. In his presence people said that Mawlana Rumi had stated, "I am one with the seventy-three religious sects." Since he was an egotistical person, he wanted to punish the Master and shame him. He sent for one of his companions who was a great scholar, and said, "Ask the Master in front of the assembly whether he has said such a thing. If he admits it, insult him and punish him!" So that man came and questioned the Master, asking, "Have you said: 'I am one with the seventy-three

religious sects?’” The Master said, “I have said it.” That man opened his mouth and began to insult and curse. Mawlana Rumi laughed and said, “I am also one with what you have said.” The man became embarrassed and retreated. Shaykh ‘Ala al-Dawla Simnani said, “This saying of his is wonderful.”⁹

On the level of social practice, there is considerable evidence to indicate that Sufi hospices served as gathering places where members of different religious communities might attend without hindrance, where a generous hospitality was available to all. In the vast Indian subcontinent, this interaction (together with the willingness of Sufi authors to compose literature in their Indian mother-tongues) led to the creation of a large composite sphere of cultural and religious exchange, where Sufis practiced yogic breath control and wrote works extolling the loves of Krishna and Rama as models of the spiritual life. Similarly, the shrines and tombs of prophets in Syria-Palestine were the object of the unfettered devotion of Muslims, Jews, and Christians, in a way that frequently crossed the boundaries of standard religious identities. In North Africa, the cult of Jewish saints took on many of the qualities of observance found among Muslims.

The forces that have recently impelled resistance to the interreligious recognition just alluded to still need to be identified. Figures from the margins of Islamic history, like the 14th-century iconoclastic thinker Ibn Taymiyyah, have been resuscitated in modern times in a simplistic fashion to advance the intolerant agenda of the Wahhabis and neo-Salafis. To be sure, every religious tradition has its share of recalcitrant Tertullians, who angrily reject the tempering influence of reason (a point that was not acknowledged in recent remarks by the Pope). Was Ibn Taymiyyah inspired in his exclusivism by the devastation of the pagan, the Mongol invasions, which had destroyed the vestiges of the Islamic caliphate? If so, why was Rûmî not similarly affected?

I am tempted to observe that the totalistic doctrine of the Wahhabis is a powerful example of the rhetoric of fundamentalism, which erases tradition by claiming to return to the foundational message of the religion. But its rhetorical shift to the voice of God does not conceal a *libido dominandi*, a desire to dominate through a discourse that transparently asserts its identity with the will of God. From a historical perspective, one may also observe that the attempt to erase all diversions among Muslims is a remarkable novelty, which very much contradicts the principle enunciated by the Prophet Muhammad, that “diversity of opinion is a mercy for my community.”

There are voices being raised that still challenge the audacious claims of exclusivism in an Islamic language. Many examples could be given. Jihadists who seek to invoke the Qur’an as their justification typically invoke the doctrine of abrogation to claim that verses delivered later in the sequence of the

revelation of the Qur’an negate earlier ones that happen to proclaim a positive relation with the other monotheistic religions. Such an opportunistic strategy denies any significance to the irenic and clearly pluralistic passages found throughout the Qur’an, implying that the sacred texts trimmed the will of God in accordance with the vicissitudes of Muhammad’s political fortunes.

Against that strategy, one may note the examples of recent figures who have labored to discover more universal perspectives. Among these has been Ustad Mahmud Taha, the Sudanese thinker (executed by the government) who proclaimed that the political conditions encountered by Muhammad in Medina in no way compromise the universal ethical standards of the Meccan sections of the Qur’an. Abdul Karim Soroush in Iran has engaged with the thought of philosophers Alvin Plantinga and John Hick on religious pluralism, while challenging the claim of the Iranian regime to represent the will of God with their all-too-human pronouncements on religion. Malaysian intellectual Chandra Muzaffar insists upon applying equally clear ethical standards to the excesses of neo-colonialism and to the pretensions of Islamic exclusivism alike.

The options of pluralism and universalism on the one hand, and exclusivism on the other, are perennial choices within every tradition. The ultimate reasons that prompt one’s choice remain hidden within the human heart. But I think it is safe to say that proclamations of ideological authority typically emerge within a theatre of political contestation, rather than springing from purely religious considerations.

As a matter of urgency, the task is now before members of all religious backgrounds to create the conditions for the formation of ethical communities, whether local or internationally networked, that can strengthen the bonds of our common humanity; this meeting is surely a step in that direction.



NOTES

¹ See the articles “pluralisme” and “universalisme” in André Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1972).

² Irene Schneider, “Pluralism: Legal and Ethical-Religious”; Gudrun Krämer, “Pluralism: Political,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, ed. Richard Martin (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004: 2:533-536).



RACHEL REEDIJK

Dialogue Committee, Progressive Jewish Congregation, Amsterdam, Netherlands

FIRST OF ALL, I WOULD LIKE TO CONGRATULATE THE SPANDA FOUNDATION WITH THE launch of this important *Jubilo* project. I have drawn my inspiration for this lecture from two sources: praxis and science. As mentioned in the program, I am a member of the Dialogue Committee of the Progressive Jewish Congregation in Amsterdam. Today I will focus on my research on the interfaith dialogue of Jews, Christians and Muslims. My preliminary question was what happens to people when they get involved in interreligious dialogue? My research question is: “What is the effect of interfaith dialogue on their respective identities”? I have started from two presuppositions, one empirical and the other theoretical.

My empirical assumption was that the people in the pews were anxious about identity-loss. One of my Jewish friends told me: “I have to take the risk of befriending non-Jewish friends”. He put into words what is felt by many: the risk of alienation from your own religion, the risk of syncretism with another religion or even the risk of conversion to that other religion. In political discourse sometimes a fourth element is introduced: domination by the other religion. In this sense one of our Dutch MP’s recently described Islam as a tsunami threatening Dutch identity.

The theoretical assumption was that social science is dominated by either/or conceptions: individual versus society, tradition versus modernity, tradition versus integration, and so forth. In certain theories a false contradiction has been assumed between cultural boundary and cultural content. Theories that focus on boundaries between ethnic groups ignore cultural content and vice versa. In theories of boundary construction the kipa, the headscarf, dreadlocks and ties are presented as identity-markers. According to his theory cultural or religious elements are instruments people use to promote their ethnic group-interests. The opposite approach focuses one-sidedly on cultural content and ignores the fact that in a global world people continually cross boundaries, literally, and metaphorically speaking. Cross-fertilisation, however, is seen as a threat.

Prior to the question of the effect of interfaith dialogue on the identity-construction, another subject had to be addressed: why is identity so important to

³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Comparative Religion: Whither – and Why?”, in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

⁴ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: an introduction to history*, trans. Franz Rosenthal; abridged and edited by N.J. Dawood (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 2005).

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London-New York: Verso, 1991).

⁶ Ahmad M. H. Shboul, *Al-Mas’udh & his world: a Muslim humanist and his interest in non-Muslims* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979).

⁷ Jacques Waardenburg, *Islam et sciences des religions: huit leçons au collège de France* (Paris: Documents et Inédits du Collège de France, 1998)

⁸ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989: 333-354).

⁹ Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Nafahat al-uns min hadarat al-quds*, ed. Mahmud ‘Abidi (Tehran: Intisharat-i Irtila’at, 1992: 463), translated by Carl W. Ernst, *Teachings of Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999: 174).



10 people? Anthropologist Ralph Grillo offers an explanation by drawing a connection with the emergence of the modern nation-state. Previously, the state was not primarily interested in their subjects' identity but in the levying of taxes, and here Grillo mentions the example of the Turkish *millet* system. On the contrary, the modern nation-state generates a normative vision on identity: civilians are supposed to subscribe to a presumed national identity, or in contemporary political language: to Dutch standards and values. In the collective memory of the Jewish community it was Napoleon who introduced this policy. He demanded that French Jews make a clear choice between either *la patrie* or the Jewish Nation. This either/or paradigm is still predominant in political discourse. Dutch residents who are born and bred in the Netherlands, but whose parents and grandparents came from Turkey or Morocco, are asked to answer the loyalty question: are they loyal to Istanbul *or* to Amsterdam, to Rabat *or* to The Hague?

Grillo and several other scientists: from Gerd Baumann to Olivier Roy, say that the nation-state has become an obsolete concept and that instead we are living in a post-modern Global World. The major property of the post-modern identity, according to them, is that it does not exist: there are no fixed and clear-cut identities anymore. In a post-modern world people are permanently moving between different domains. The post-modern man and woman swap political parties, substitute marriage-until-death-do-part-us by serial monogamy, and shop among western and eastern religions and worldviews. It is no coincidence that the metaphor applied to post-modern identity is the chameleon.

In my opinion post-modern scientists overestimate the individuals' ability to create his own personality, to construct his individual identity, because post-modern individuals are still embedded in larger symbolic systems and social structures. Post-modern theories underestimate the meaning people still seek and find in so-called Great Stories: socialism, liberalism or religious frames of reference. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz elucidates this in his famous essay when he says that, without a cultural frame of reference, chaos threatens to break in upon men, not because a tumult of events lack interpretations, but because it lacks interpretability.

I agree with post-modern scientists that the world is changing at a tremendously increasing rate, and that the respective global developments can be very frightening. Sometimes one can get a deeper understanding of tensions in society by comparing them with the four phases of a mourning process. A typical statement of the first phase of *denying* is that multicultural society is an illusion. The Leefbaren – Livibles – a Dutch neo-conservative denomination are representatives of the second stage of *anger*. In the third phase of *acceptance* local

politicians, universities, healthcare organisations and the like realise that multiculturalism is a fact of life. In the fourth stage people carefully start *trying out new ideas and new practices*.

Interfaith dialogue has to be located in this fourth domain. Jews, Christians and Muslims, dedicated to dialogue, are sometimes called, in the jargon of dialogue, “grensgangers”, border-travellers, since they are deliberately exploring and crossing boundaries, building bridges, not knowing where their journey will end.

The Jews, Christians and Muslims I have interviewed for my PhD research knew that the key issue of our conversation would be the effect of dialogue on their proper identity. Does interfaith dialogue in their experience threaten the continuity of faith communities; are they losing faith so to speak? A methodological question was how to analyse their statements and these fascinating life-stories? The thesis could be approached from various perspectives. I have considered a hermeneutic approach, since my interviewees addressed lots of interesting theological questions, like the trinity. Thus I remember a Jewish interviewee who told me that some of his Christian counterparts were stunned when told that the New Testament does not form a part of the Jewish liturgy. I remember a Christian interviewee who told me that Jews and Muslims might have a better understanding of monotheism. I remember the Muslim who had discovered that the concept of religious diversity was mentioned and advocated in the Qur'an already.

During my personal voyage of discovery as a researcher, it became clear that I had to focus my analysis on two major questions: stereotypes and ritual, rather than hermeneutics. Starting with the stereotypes. What fascinated me was the informants' profound conviction, or maybe I should say belief, that interfaith dialogue will unmask and eliminate prejudice, although nobody could explain why this would be the case.

One of the Muslim interviewees offered a religious answer: God unseals our hearts. From a scientific perspective Pettigrew found that intimate personal contact has indeed positive effects on cross group relations. The first effect is de-categorisation, seeing the other as a human being. The second effect is re-categorisation, the construction of a more inclusive identity. A third, but hypothetical effect is a dual identity strategy: remaining faithful to your own tradition *and* simultaneously developing a deeper understanding of the other. My interviewees confirmed that interfaith dialogue taught them to deal with both identity and alterity. Tambiah and Mudimbe, both scientists with a non-western background, say that dichotomous thinking, the Us versus Thou approach, is a typical western phenomenon. This is an interesting theory that has to be explored further.

I have focused on ritual since ritual seems to be the proof of the interreligious pudding. First, because religious rituals are experienced as holy, and second



D E N N I S D E J O N G

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FIRST OF ALL, I WISH TO THANK THE ORGANISERS OF THIS MEETING FOR INVITING ME HERE on the occasion of the launch of the *Jubilo* project. The problems which the project envisages to address, i.e. globalisation, education for peace, tolerance, intercultural and interfaith peace building actions, ethnic integration, conflict prevention and reconciliation are all matters of great concern to governments and are receiving an ever growing amount of public attention. The instrument to be used by the project, i.e. the development of a comparative approach to Jewish, Christian and Islamic realities and the promotion of a comparative vision on Abrahamic faiths is not, however, traditionally the object of governmental activities. In my lecture, I hope to show you that times are changing and that increasingly the role of religion and of faith-based actors is recognised in the context of the integrated foreign policies of the Netherlands. In this respect, I shall concentrate on the role of such actors in the field of peace-building.

Based on the principle of separation of Church and State, many have argued that the State should remain at a safe distance from religious affairs. Religions also have hesitations to get too closely involved in political affairs. For example, in the encyclical 'Deus Caritas Est' the Pope argues that religions should not become directly engaged in politics. At the same time, he does recognise the role religions have to play in peace-building efforts. Despite these hesitations and provided that we share the same objectives, one could wonder if it would not be a missed opportunity for governments not to take an active interest in the role of faith-based organisations.

The Dutch government has a long tradition when it comes to the promotion and the protection of the freedom of religion or belief. The Netherlands was very active during the negotiations of the 1981 UN-Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief. On 25 November, the 25th anniversary of this Declaration will be celebrated during an international conference in Prague, which has been entirely funded by the Netherlands ministry of Foreign Affairs. I can also refer to the seminar in The Hague, which the ministry funded in 2001 and which led, inter alia, to the creation of the Netherlands Platform for the International Protection of the Freedom of

because they generate transformation in and between men. Religious rituals seem to be the pre-eminent boundary-markers of interfaith dialogue: Catholics won't allow Protestants to attend the Eucharist, at least in theory. Jews won't appreciate it when Christians build a Soeka or when they ascribe a Christian meaning to it. On the other hand you could say that rituals, in an interreligious context, help people to cross boundaries. In anthropological terms, they are *rites de passage*. According to Van Gennep, who introduced this concept, people are vulnerable during the transition in time or in space. Van Gennep explains - in his somewhat old-fashioned vocabulary - that smoking-a-pipe-together helps us in the encounter with the other. Contemporary examples are synagogues inviting Muslims at the Seder, Churches inviting immigrants for the Christmas dinner, and Mosques inviting neighbours for the Iftar meal.

The answer of my interviewees, all of them key figures in interfaith dialogue, to the question if they lost their identity, is a categorical no. Dialogue taught them to cope with identity *and* alterity. Even when they say: *stick to your tradition*, it is not consistent with what they do.

Jews, Christians and Muslims

involved in dialogue learn, grow and hange while simultaneously remaining faithful to their tradition. In other words, identity is a dynamic concept. Therefore, I believe that interfaith dialogue can be an important role model for the integration discourse at large as well.



Religion or Belief. This Platform consists of representatives of NGO's and aims at including all major religions or beliefs in the Netherlands. The Platform and the Netherlands human rights ambassador meet at least once a year to discuss the priorities in the field of the international protection of religion or belief.

More recently, the Dutch government also became more interested in the important role of faith-based organisations in peace-building. The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs supports organisations such as the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) and the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP). The IARF is carrying out a training programme on religious tolerance based on audiovisual materials which they have recently produced. One of the main activities of the WCRP is support of interreligious Councils at local, national and regional levels. Moreover, in September 2005, the Dutch Minister for Development Co-operation, Mrs Van Ardenne, together with a large number of private development organisations, established the Knowledge Forum on Religion and Development Co-operation. One of the working groups of this Knowledge Forum deals with religion and conflict. Both the ministry and the NGO's carry out a series of case studies on the role of faith-based peace-building organisations. In 2005, the Clingendael Institute submitted to the Ministry a general mapping study, which clearly showed the potential of such organisations. The main findings were:

- ¶ faith-based peace-building actors carry out their peace-building activities in 'religious' and 'non-religious conflicts'. This addresses the misunderstanding that religious actors can only deal with peace-building if religion is part of the problem;
- ¶ activities of these actors include: advocacy, education, intra-faith and inter-faith dialogue, mediation, observation and transitional justice;
- ¶ potential strengths of faith-based peace-building actors are: strong faith-based motivation, long-term commitment, long-term presence on the ground, moral and spiritual authority, transcendental methods of mediation, niche to mobilise others for peace;
- ¶ potential weaknesses of these actors are: risk of proselytisation, lack of focus on results, possible lack of professionalism.

The researchers also noted as a potential weakness of faith-based peace-building actors the lack of attention for impact measurement. In my opinion, that reflects a cultural difference: whereas within the ministry impact measurement is an essential part of our work, faith-based actors may take a different, more long-term perspective. In that case, less emphasis is put on short-term results, as long as the actors are convinced that their work is conducive to long-term peace-building.

This year, the Clingendael Institute examined the situation in Sudan and is engaged in similar research with respect to the Itury region in the DRC. This research shows that there are certainly complications: in Sudan, for example, many religious organisations have political affiliations and the Institute warns donors against identifying themselves with individual organisations. However, umbrella organisations, such as the Interreligious Council in Sudan, are potential partners. During the 8th Assembly of the WCRP, religious leaders reached agreement in principle about the extension of the existing IRC to religious leaders in the South, thus establishing a more representative body. Such a body can help in overcoming religious differences and bringing about peace in this country.

Interfaith dialogue, and especially interfaith action, can be most helpful in taking away any misunderstandings about the religions or beliefs concerned: too often, extremists abuse religions for their own political purposes, for creating hatred among religious groups. Through active engagement in interfaith activities, religious leaders and their organisations can demonstrate that they do not align themselves with such abuses and that there is scope for various religions and beliefs to co-exist in a peaceful manner, and, even better, to work together for peace and development. The Dutch government therefore encourages international organisations such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the UN to work together with faith-based organisations. We welcome events such as the 2nd Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions which was held in Astana, Kazakhstan, in September 2006. We also favour close involvement of NGO's, including faith-based organisations, in the work of the new UN Peace-Building Commission. In the resolution on freedom of religion and belief of the Commission on Human Rights in 2005, the Netherlands introduced a special paragraph calling for intra- and inter-faith dialogue. The resolution also referred to the Dialogue among Civilisations, an initiative taken in 2001 by the then president of Iran, Khatami, which led to the proclamation by the UN General Assembly of 2001 as the year of Dialogue among Civilisations. These days, the UN is focusing on a new initiative, originally taken by the prime ministers of Turkey and Spain, but endorsed and supported by the UN Secretary General, called the Alliance of Civilisations. Such initiatives try to promote international understanding through dialogue. In order for dialogue to be successful, there ought to be no taboos: discussions should include, for example, tensions between religious prescriptions and human rights. In this respect, reference can be made to prescriptions of certain religions that undermine the right to change one's religion or belief, or to prescriptions affecting the rights of women. Both the Dialogue among Civilisations and the Alliance of Civilisations point to the role of non-governmental organisations: governments are often not best placed to organise dialogue. Sometimes, political overtones only complicate matters, but even if all governments concerned are sincerely interested in dialogue, it remains



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WHAT IS ISLAM?

questionable if their efforts will reach all layers of society. Non-governmental organisations have therefore a substantial role to play in this regard: they know best how to reach out to society at large.

There may be challenges for faith-based organisations, such as a lack of quantifiable results in peace-building and the idea that they may have a double agenda, for example, the propagation of their own beliefs in addition to peace-building. However, there are certainly many opportunities: their focus on long-term, sustainable peace is complementary to the often short-term political agendas of governments.

And last but not least, unlike governments, faith-based organisations are able to create a transcendental atmosphere that is conducive to personal engagement and breakthroughs in processes of reconciliation and healing, which is difficult to achieve for secular governments. The role of such organisations cannot therefore be underestimated in the field of peace-building.

Against this background, I am looking forward to the results of the *Jubilo* project: the promotion of tolerance and the reduction of tensions between members of different religions or beliefs in today's world is a formidable task. I am confident that with the help of on-governmental, including faith-based, organisations, it will be possible to promote a world in which religion will not be a divisive factor, but instead a force promoting harmony and understanding.



THE ROOT OF THE WORD ISLAM IN ARABIC IS *SALAMA*, WHICH IS THE ORIGIN OF THE words Peace and / or Submission, a submission to God and peace to all humanity. It is, thus, no wonder why the salutation in Islam is *Al-Salamu Alaikum* or “Peace on You”. In this regard, Prophet Mohammad ordered his fellow Muslims to salute others Muslims or non-Muslims with peace when he said: “Peace before Speech”. It is a Rule in Islam that during wartime, an enemy warrior who pronounces the word peace is immune.

There is no coercion in Islam; Islam came with the just word of our creator. In Qur'an 2:256; God said, “Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error [...]”. There are many other verses in the Qur'an that deal with the nature of spreading God's message. One of my favorites, which I keep quoting, is verse 10:99: “If it had been thy Lord's Will, they would all have believed, all who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe!” These verses and many others show how much emphasis Islam places on the mind of people, Muslims or non-Muslims.

Muslims are governed by the rules that the relationship with non-Muslims should be based on justice, mutual respect, cooperation, and communication. The Qur'an is very explicit about the justice part of the relationship when God stated in verse 60:08, “Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just”.

In the first part, Islam approaches peace in the *eschatological* sense, as the ultimate goal of human life, almost synonymous with salvation. Another way in which the Islam looks at peace may be called the *psychological* sense, perceived as tranquillity and peace of mind, an inner confidence born of faith that enables the religious believer to face adversity without anxiety or despair. Particularly when one is facing the approach of death, the believer can attain a peace of mind, which will enable the person to overcome spiritual turmoil and fear. A third aspect of peace is *universal* peace. It reflects the widespread conviction of the time that humankind can sink no lower than criminality towards its own kind and expresses the hope for a time of peace and prosperity for all mankind.

According to the Sayings of our Prophet, the virtues of civilisation will prevail, the face of the earth cleaned of filth, and universal peace be secured.

QUR'AN AND PEACE

The Qur'an, taken as a complete text, gives a message of hope, faith, and peace to a community of one billion people. The overwhelming message is that peace is to be found through faith in God, and justice among fellow human beings.

At the time the Qur'an was revealed (7th century AD), there was no United Nations or Amnesty International to keep the peace or expose injustice. Inter-tribal violence and vengeance was commonplace. As a matter of survival, one must have been willing to defend against aggression from all sides. Nevertheless, the Qur'an repeatedly urges forgiveness and restraint, and warns believers not to "transgress" or become "oppressors." Some examples:

If anyone slays a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if he slew all people. And if anyone saves a life, it would be as if he saved the life of all people. (Qur'an 5:32).

Invite all to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching. And argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious.

And if you punish, let your punishment be proportional to the wrong at has been done to you. But if you show patience, that is indeed the best course. Be patient, for your patience is from God. And do not grieve over them, or distress yourself because of their plots. For God is with those who restrain themselves, and those who do good. (Qur'an 16:125-128).

Anti-Muslims resort to a deceitful misrepresentation when they misquote the Quranic verses of the second chapter. They claim that Quran promoted killing the infidels wherever you find them. Indeed, this is true but only if the infidels attack Muslims. Here are the verses complete:

Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loves not transgressors (Qur'an 2:190-193).

The United Nation's Charter explicitly discusses the right of the occupied people to resist their occupiers.

ISLAM'S UNIVERSAL CALL FOR DIALOGUE AND PEACE

The very nature of religion demands the dialogue and peace among world religions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam accept the same source and pursue the same goal. Regardless of how their adherents implement their faith in their daily lives, such generally accepted values as love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness,

mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood, and freedom are all values exalted by religion. Most of these values are accorded the highest precedence in the messages brought by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, peace be upon them.

Muslims accept all Prophets and Books sent to different peoples throughout history, and regard belief in them as an essential principle of being Muslim. A Muslim is a true follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and all other Prophets, peace be upon them. Not believing in one Prophet or Book means that one is not a Muslim. Thus we acknowledge the oneness and the basic unity of religion – which is a symphony of God's blessings and mercy- and the universality of belief in religion. Therefore, religion is a system of belief that embraces all races and all beliefs, a road that brings everyone together in brotherhood.

There are many common points for dialogue among Muslims, Christians, and Jews who take their religion seriously. As pointed out by Michael Wyschogrod, an American professor of philosophy, there are just as many theoretical or creedal reasons for Muslims and Jews drawing closer to one another as there are for Jews and Christians coming together. Furthermore, practically and historically, the Muslim world has a good record of dealing with Jews: there has been almost no discrimination, and there has been no Holocaust, nor any denial of basic human rights, or genocide. On the contrary, Jews have always been welcomed in times of trouble, as when the Ottoman State embraced them after their expulsion from Spain.

We believe that interfaith dialogue and peace process is a must today, and that the first step in establishing it is forgetting the past, ignoring polemical arguments, and giving precedence to common points, which far outnumber polemical ones.

Fourteen centuries ago, Islam made the greatest universal call the world has ever seen. The Qur'an calls the People of the Book (Christians and Jews primarily):

Say: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we take not, from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God." If then they turn back, say you: "Bear witness that we are Muslims (i.e., those who have surrendered to God's Will)." (3:64).

And in another verse "And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflate wrong (and injury): but say, "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our Allah and your Allah is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)."

Some political conflicts in history, like the Crusades of the medieval age or the allegedly "Islamic" terrorism of today, has created distrust between many Christians and Muslims. However, there is no inherent clash between these two great religions. From the Muslim point of view, in fact, Christians are the closest

friends and allies in the world. The Qur'an boldly declares? "Nearest among men in love to the believers will you find those who say, 'We are Christians': because amongst these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant?" (5:82).

Muslims share many details of faith with Christians. Besides our common faith in God the Creator, we both believe that Jesus Christ was the Word of God (An-Nisaa' 4:171) and that he had a virgin birth and performed many miracles (Al-Ma'idah 5:110). Islamic tradition also holds that Jesus will return towards the end of time and save humanity from unbelief.

Our common faith in God is so important that God commands Muslims to make a call for alliance to Christians and Jews, the People of the Book (Scripture): "Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God." (Aal-'i Imran 3:64).

Based on this Qur'anic vision, we can confidently conclude that Muslims should cooperate with faithful Christians and Jews in matters that are important to each of these three monotheistic faiths.

And what can be more important than the case against materialism, the modern denial of God?

Interestingly, Said Nursi, in the 1950s, foresaw an alliance between Islam and Christianity against materialism. He prophetically wrote, "A tyrannical current born of naturalist and materialist philosophy will gradually gain strength and spread at the end of time, reaching such a degree that it denies God. [...] Although defeated before the atheistic current while separate, Christianity and Islam will have the capability to defeat and rout it as a result of their alliance" (Nursi, Letters, s. 77-78). Half a century after Nursi, the stage for that alliance is set.

In conclusion, we must say that dialogue is necessary, and indeed, is the only acceptable way to bring our two religions closer. It is our common desire that all misunderstandings and preconceptions be put aside. We must cultivate mutual trust in order to achieve a better understanding. Dialogue is necessary if we are to overcome the past and the present of alienation, confrontation, enmity and hatred. Those who are responsible for this dialogue must make every effort to solve the prevailing problems of our world, to build a more human society characterized by justice and fraternal love.

While being fully aware of our common responsibility, Christians and Muslims are duty bound to respect absolutely each other's religious beliefs and overcome antagonistic feelings. We must strive for solidarity if we are to resolve the

problems facing the world, for the Earth is the common home of all nations wherein we are called to worship the One True God.

There are only two conditions for success of this peace. The first thing that should be avoided is forcing the two sides to make concessions to their religion and the policy of creating a new Islam for Muslims should be abandoned. We should share commonalities and respect differences. We should look to establish dialogue within Islam, not outside of Islam and Muslims. Otherwise we can drum by ourselves and only play by ourselves. Unfortunately the United States and some European States are implementing this policy and they are not meet with successful at their policies. They are wasting both time and money. The second thing that should be avoided by both sides is insults to the things that people believe are sacred. We should respect spiritual leaders and moral values of all religions.

"SPREADING THE FAITH BY THE SWORD" IS AN EVIL LEGEND

Islam expressly prohibited any persecution of the "Peoples of the Book". In Islamic society, a special place was reserved for Jews and Christians. They did not enjoy completely equal rights, but almost so. They had to pay a special poll-tax, but were exempted from military service – a trade-off that was quite welcome to many Jews. Every honest Jew who knows the history of his people cannot but feel a deep sense of gratitude to Islam, which has protected the Jews for fifty generations.

The Jewish writer Uri Avnery said that the story about "spreading the faith by the sword" is an evil legend, one of the myths that grew up in Europe during the great wars against the Muslims, the *reconquista* of Spain by the Christians, the Crusades and the repulsion of the Turks, who almost conquered Vienna. I suspect that the German Pope also honestly believes in these fables. That means that the leader of the Catholic world, who is a Christian theologian in his own right, did not make the effort to study the history of other religions.

To claim that Islam spread by the sword was a widespread theory during the Middle Ages. However, the world has by now left it behind. It is not only Muslim historians who point to the fact that Islam spread peacefully, but some Western historians, such as Thomas Arnold, a well-known English historian, dealt with the fact that Islam spread through the promotion of its culture, and its readiness to meet the needs of mankind. His book *The Call to Islam* proved that the sword was only a secondary factor, and not the main reason, for the Islamic conquests of the world.

There is no escape from viewing them against the background of the new Crusade of some leaders, with their slogans of “Islamofascism” and the “Global War on Terrorism” – when “terrorists” has become a synonym for Muslims. I think this is a cynical attempt to justify the domination of the world’s oil resources.

In 628CE, the Prophet (s) sent a charter of freedom to St Catherine’s Monastery in Mt. Sinai – in which we see the true magnificent nature of the Holy Prophet (s).

“This is a message from Muhammad bin Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them.

Verily, the servants, the helpers, my followers, and I defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them.

No compulsion is to be on them.

Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries.

No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims’ houses.

Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God’s covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate.

No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them. If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray.

Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants.

No one of the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world).”

Does this letter leave anything out to counter the claim of the Byzantine emperor that Prophet Muhammad (s) preached his faith with sword? I leave it to the pope to judge on his own.

For many centuries the Muslims ruled Greece. Did the Greeks become Muslims? Did anyone even try to Islamitise them? On the contrary, Christian Greeks held the highest positions in the Ottoman administration. The Bulgarians, Serbs, Romanians, Hungarians and other European nations lived at one time or another under Ottoman rule and clung to their Christian faith. Nobody compelled them to become Muslims and all of them remained devoutly Christian.

True, the Albanians did convert to Islam, and so did the Bosnians. But nobody argues that they did this under duress. They adopted Islam in order to become favorites of the government and enjoy the fruits thereof.

CONCLUSION

I agree with Islam

as it considers the whole of humanity as one family.
All have common ground as the worshippers of Allah
and the sons of Adam.

That is why the Prophet (s) has stated it clearly in front of the Muslim congregation at the Farewell Pilgrimage saying: “O people, Your Lord is One and your father is one. All of you are traced back to Adam, and Adam was created from dust. No privileges of a certain person over the other save by righteous deeds.”

Islam commands that “one believer should not be vexed with another believer for more than three days,” and that so long as there is no reconciliation, both sides perpetually suffer the torments of fear and revenge.” Islam advises us in the following way: “Look at the defect in your own soul that you do not see or do not wish to see. Deduct a share for that. As for the small share which then remains, if you respond with forgiveness, pardon, and magnanimity, in such a way as to conquer your enemy swiftly and safely, then you will have escaped all sin and harm.” Thus, self-awareness should lead to repentance, repentance to forgiveness, forgiveness to reconciliation and the seeds for a lasting peace are laid.





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ON 7 AUGUST 1998 THE AMERICAN EMBASSIES IN NAIROBI AND DAR ES SALAAM WERE bombed and two hundred people lost their lives. These bombings shattered the image of Africa's tradition of peaceful religious coexistence. In this contribution I explore how interreligious relations are dealt with in East Africa. More in particular, I investigate how interreligious relations are dealt with and should be dealt with in departments of religious studies and schools of theology in Nairobi. It is in these institutions that teachers of religion and pastoral ministers, thus the future religious leaders of Africa, are being trained. This contribution is based on fieldwork that I conducted in Nairobi. During the first three months of 2004 I visited twenty institutions of higher learning, interviewed their staff and students, gathered their academic handbooks and spread questionnaires. First I describe the revival of religion and the spread of religious tensions in East Africa. Next I analyze how interreligious relations are perceived and taught in departments of religious studies and faculties of theology in Nairobi. Thereafter I interpret these findings in the light of three models of inter-cultural communication. Last but not least, I recommend a new approach in the study of religions and interreligious relations¹.

THE REVIVAL OF RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

In the 1950s and 1960s it was generally thought that religions would be marginalized through the process of modernization. Modernization pluralizes, individualizes and thus relativizes worldviews and lifestyle, according to the advocates of the secularisation thesis. Modernization would necessarily lead to a decline in religion, maybe not in the private sphere, but almost certainly in the public domain. At present scholars of religion acknowledge that the opposite seems true. There is a worldwide resurgence of religion (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004). Explanations for this phenomenon have been varied. Some scholars of religion hold that through free market economy and multi-party politics there is greater competition between religions, and therefore there is also increased religious awareness. Thus, the principles of modernity, liberalism and pluralism do not diminish the importance of religion, but rather they increase the importance of it.

However this may be, religions are alive and active in Africa. One must view the resurgence of religion in Africa against its wider background (Stamer 1995: 54). In the de-colonisation era most African countries had high expectations. Slave trade, imperialism and colonialism were over and Africa looked forward to a bright future. But the links with the former colonial powers remained and little by little most African countries got caught up in Cold War tensions. For ideological and neo-imperialist reasons many African countries received a lot of development aid and African dictators were kept in power. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the situation changed. The United States of America and Russia no longer had an interest in Africa. To some extent the Islamic-Arab bloc filled the gap left by the superpowers. Whereas once there had been a scramble for Africa, albeit motivated by sheer self-interest, now nobody seemed interested (Maluleke 2002: 170)².

Much deeper than the economic and political crisis, however, was the identity crisis (Stamer 1995: 59-60). After independence the spotlight was on the national identity of African states and their links with the superpowers, 'West' and 'East', although some remained non-aligned. Today some of those new nation-states are disintegrating and their people are looking for new identities, which they find in the security of the Islam with its strict rules, as well as in neo-traditional and Christian sects (Gifford 1996). The (Islamic) Council for the Promotion of the Qur'an in Tanzania, the (neo-traditional) *Mungiki* in Kenya and the (Christian) Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments in Uganda, to mention just some examples, are organizations that can be interpreted in this light.

During my first years in Tanzania, where I worked from 1984 to 1988, religious affiliation was not a big issue, at least not in the public domain. At best, religion featured as civic religion (Westerlund 1980). Now religionism (*udini*) is an issue, also in Tanzania (Wijsen 2003). The renewed interest in religion can also be seen in the public universities. The secularist and rationalist climate of unbelief of their alma mater, that the University of London had fostered among staff and students of African university colleges "gradually lost control over them" (Platvoet & Van Rinsum 2003: 131)³. Now there is "a much stronger religious presence at universities and institutions of higher learning, in particular through the Departments of Religious Studies," say Platvoet and Van Rinsum (2003: 152). Shorter and Onyancha (1997: 21) likewise note that "the last quarter of a century has witnessed a stronger religious presence at universities and institutions of higher learning and, with it, a certain erosion of academic unbelief"⁴.

GROWING TENSIONS BETWEEN RELIGIONS

There is not only a revival of religion in Africa, but also growing tension between religions in Africa. The universal and thus missionary nature of Islam and

Christianity cannot be ignored. Matthew 28:19, "Go then to all peoples everywhere", has its parallel in Sura 34:28, "And We have sent you to all humankind". Both religions lay exclusive claims to divine revelation and have programs to convert Africa. The objective of the Islam in Africa Organization "to support, enhance and co-ordinate Da'wah work all over Africa" (Alkali 1993: 435) has its parallel in the objective of the Evangelisation 2000 campaign of the Catholic Church "to give Jesus Christ a more Christian world as the best 2000th birthday gift possible"⁵. Jihad against Christians is countered by crusades for Christ (Wijsen & Mfumbusa 2004)⁶.

The adjustment to a free market economy in Africa saw the introduction of videocassette recorders and videocassettes that were used in religious campaigns. The emergence of a free press allowed people to express opinions in ways that were not possible before. Sects began to publish newspapers. Some of them are also active on the internet⁷. The introduction of multi-party politics led to the formation of political parties and free expression of opinions (although many dissidents ended up in prison, exile, or dead). Some political movements, both Islamic and Christian, are manifestly sponsored by outside agencies, but the religious dynamics within African countries cannot be ignored.

The complacency of the world's most industrialized countries (G-7) is said to be at the root of Muslims' problems. This is what Mazrui (2006: 96) calls "Global Apartheid". Six of the seven most industrialised countries are predominantly Christian and prevent predominantly Islamic countries from securing an equal share in the world market. Historical and demographic reasons are also cited, such as the former identification of Christianity with colonialism and bad leadership after independence. In the post-independence era most African leaders were Christians. Since many of them amassed vast wealth, leaving their subjects wallowing in abject poverty, all the evils that engulfed Africa were identified with Christianity. Sometimes Muslims claim to be a majority, as in Nigeria; sometimes they claim they are second-class citizens and underrepresented in government and at universities, as in Tanzania (Jumbe 1994)⁸.

Some Muslims think Islam is the only religion that can help people solve their problems, basing themselves on the Qur'an: "You are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in God" (Sura 3:110). The same can be said of Christians who hold that "Christ is the Answer" or of Afro-centric thinkers who "urge those black peoples who are still members of the colonial and slave religions to quit them and join [the] true religion of African spirituality" (Odak 1997: 16).

In the context of the New Partnership for African Development there is an emphasis on good leadership. Therefore, I am interested in how interreligious relations are dealt with by religious leaders in Africa. And more specifically, how are pastoral ministers and teachers of religion, thus the future religious leaders in Africa, being trained in institutions of higher learning? In order to find answers to these questions I conducted fieldwork in Nairobi during the first three months of 2004. I visited twenty departments of religious studies and theological schools⁹, all of them registered or in the process of being registered to offer academic degrees. In all cases I saw the registrar and/or the academic dean. I interviewed them about their education in interreligious relations in the department or school and collected academic handbooks and other written sources. Finally, I distributed a questionnaire among eighty members of the Association of Theological Institutions in Eastern Africa through the secretary.

I found that since the 1998 bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam there has been quite some study and reflection on interreligious relations in religious and ecclesiastical organizations, such as the All Africa Conference of Churches and the Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (Temple & Mbillah 2001), the National Council of Churches in Kenya¹⁰, the interreligious Council of Kenya and the United Religions Initiative¹¹, but not so much in departments of religious studies and faculties of theology¹². When I asked why, I was given various reasons. Some interviewees said: "Dialogue is not a big problem for us, we have always lived harmoniously in mixed communities." The African tradition of peaceful coexistence has continued right up to the present. "We are first Africans, and only secondary Christians or Muslims." Thus African-ness is perceived as a common ground. Other interviewees said: "Dialogue is not our first priority. We have other concerns: drought, disease and civil war." Most African theologians are "more interested in development projects than in religious or interreligious issues".

I was also exposed to quite a different angle when I was told "We are still struggling to find an African Christian identity. So dialogue with others is over-ambitious at this stage." One interviewee stated "The Muslims are not interested in dialogue, so why should we be?" Dialogue, it is said, is to a large extent a Christian affair. "We teach our students to listen to and learn from other believers. But they [the Muslims] continue to teach and preach. This is to promote Christian self-destruction, euthanasia." And another interviewee said: "We do not like dialogue. Dialogue is something of the West." Dialogue is associated with relativism and pluralism. "Don't export your problems to Africa" said another. "We accept the Bible as it is." Reacting against relativism and indifferentism, this interviewee said: "If everything is true, nothing is true." Yet another interviewee said: "Dialogue and evangelization necessarily go together; we do not separate them as you do in the West."

Contrary to the interviewees who perceive peaceful coexistence as a positive African value I was told: "To accept peaceful coexistence, would be to destroy Christian uniqueness and universality, and to accept pluralism and syncretism. But these are liberal Western values." Thus dialogue and Africa don't go together. And another interviewee said: "People in the West propagate peaceful coexistence," but: "There is no tradition of peaceful coexistence in Africa, at least not since the coming of Christ." This interviewee referred to Jesus when he said: "I have come to bring not peace but the sword" (Matt 10:34)¹³.

From my interviewees I learned that there are two attitudes toward (other) religions; neglect and confrontation, with very little between them. What about the academic handbooks and the questionnaires? For the sake of clarity I distinguish between public and private universities. The University of Nairobi offers a BA, an MA and a PhD in religious studies. In the MA program students can specialize in the following six areas: African Religion, Judaism/Old Testament, Christianity/New Testament, Islam, religions of Asian origin, and religious studies in Africa. A course on phenomenology of religion is compulsory for all students. In addition to this course, there are three courses on the texts, history and modern trends in the chosen specialist field¹⁴. There are courses on comparative religion, but none on interreligious relations.

The situation at Kenyatta University is pretty much the same. The BA program there offers a wide variety of sciences of religion and courses on world religions, but none on interreligious relations. The same applies to the MA program in religious studies¹⁵. In June 2006, however, the department of religious studies and philosophy was revising its curriculum. It planned to offer a B.Th. to meet students' demand. Interfaith dialogue will be one of the compulsory modules¹⁶.

The compartmentalized way of studying religions has also been observed by others. At secondary schools "a student can follow a course in either Christian Religious Education (CRE), Hindu Religious Education (HRE) or Islamic Religious Education (IRE)", says Hinga (1996: 223). Wamue (2004: 367) adds "ATR is taught alongside these other religious traditions". Both Hinga (1996: 223) and Wamue (2004: 367) say: "This pattern is also reflected at the university level."

What about the private universities? Private universities teach courses such as: "World religions", "Major religions of Africa", "Islam and African Traditional Religion", "Islam in Africa", "History and phenomenology of religion". interreligious relations are dealt with in courses such as "Mission and evangelism", "Apologetics and applied theology", "Christianity in a pluralistic society", and so

on. There are two educational programs on interreligious relations, one on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations at (the Protestant) St Paul's United Theological College in Limuru and the other on Christian-Muslim encounters at (the Roman Catholic) Tangaza School of Theology in Nairobi. The Department of Missiological and Religious Studies and the Department of Mission Studies run these programs respectively.

In general, I found that there are two approaches, which I label the missionary, and the comparative approach. In the missionary approach the other religions are dealt with from the perspective of the own religion. This is what we would call theology of religions, theology of interreligious dialogue or even interreligious theology. In the comparative approach, other religions are dealt with in their own right. This is what is done in religious studies, sometimes called science of religion, history and phenomenology of religion. Apart from the institutional setting there is a difference in scientific orientation, at least in principle. In the public universities, a secular, neutral or objective outsider perspective is dominant, although we observed already that this has shifted in the past decades. The private universities operate from a religious or religionist insider perspective. Last but not least, there is the question whether the subject of religious studies is practiced for its own sake, or whether societal or ecclesiastic goals are aimed at. But on this point, public and private universities seem united: the study of religion in East Africa almost always has a practice-orientation of reducing violence, poverty or disease.

AN INTERPRETATION OF THESE OBSERVATIONS

Since the early 1970s, philosophers and theologians of religions have produced and reproduced three models of interreligious relations, also in East Africa (Mbillah 2004: 171-175). These are the exclusivist, the inclusivist and the pluralist model. I am of the opinion that there has been very little progress in these systematic approaches of interreligious relations in the past decades; they more or less repeat what has been said already so often. Therefore, I try to look at interreligious relations from a different perspective, namely that of intercultural communication, presupposing that religion is a cultural system (Geertz 1973: 87-125). In intercultural communication three models are distinguished: the mono-cultural, the multi-cultural and the inter-cultural model¹⁷. The mono-cultural model is based on the assumption that all people are basically the same; the others are like us. This is what Mall (2000: 33) calls the identity principle. The multi-cultural model is based on the assumption that people are essentially different; the others are not like us. This is the alterity principle (Mall 2000: 16). The inter-cultural model is based on the assumption of cultural overlaps; people are equal but not the same. This is what Mall (2000: 3) calls the analogy principle.

Interpreted in this light one can say that the missionary approach to interreligious relations is based on the mono-cultural model. In the light of the Enlightenment all people are perceived as rational beings (identity principle), but some are more rational than others. For a long time scholars of religion viewed their own culture as the only or best culture. European religion (Christianity) was considered the perfect religion and European philosophy *the* (only) philosophy. The comparative approach to interreligious relations is based on the multi-cultural model. Religions are perceived as unique and (completely) different. There is (almost) no common ground or meeting-point between the others and us. Thus, safeguarding the other-ness of others is imperative. Both models are also called the modern and the post-modern model, stressing universality and relativity respectively. The inter-cultural model is based on the analogy principle; it stresses unity in diversity, carefully balancing between "same-ness" (identity) and "different-ness" (alterity).

If we interpret the exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist model in this light we can say that the mono-cultural model is equivalent to the inclusivist model and the multi-cultural to the exclusivist model. The inclusivist model says: One's own religion is *the* (only) religion. The others are already included in our religious system, although they are not aware of it. The exclusivist model holds: the religions are distinct; there is no meeting point or common ground between them. The inter-cultural model, however, differs from the pluralist model. The latter can be seen as yet another expression of the multi-cultural model, in that it views all religions as "*different* [my italics] instruments of God" (Byaruhanga-Akiiki 1989: 48), presenting "*different* [my italics] facets or sketches of God" (Durand 2000: 68).

In our present-day global world, both the mono- and multi-cultural models no longer seem adequate. The mono-cultural model stresses dependence; other religions are dependent on the own religion. The multi-religious model stresses independence. Various religions are perceived as independent systems, each in their own right. What is needed is a model that stresses interdependence, acknowledging on the one hand, that in the post-colonial era no religion has the power to impose its world view or lifestyle on other religions, and on the other hand, that in an era of increasing cultural interconnectedness no religion can be practiced in an insular way. Therefore, it seems more adequate to look at interreligious relations from the inter-cultural model.

A WAY FORWARD: INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES

What is the significance of the inter-cultural model for education in interreligious relations? In my view there is an urgent need for a new field of study to be taught in faculties of theology and departments of religious studies, one that goes beyond traditional courses such as "world religions", "Islam in Africa" or "African

Traditional Religions”, and classical disciplines such as theology, philosophy and religious studies. From a post-modern perspective the distinction between these disciplines has become irrelevant anyway. This new field of study has as subject matter the interconnectedness and interdependence of religions. It studies interreligious relations in a multi-perspective, poly-methodical way (Turner 1981). This approach overcomes the classic distinction between insider and outsider perspectives and thus defuses the controversy about ‘religionist’ versus ‘reductionist’ research methods (Cox 2003: 27-30). In this approach the other is no longer only perceived as an object of research, (as is usually the case in what is called religious studies) but is taken seriously as a subject of religious studies. In this sense it is appropriate to advocate a shift from religious studies to interreligious studies¹⁸.

Our plea for interreligious studies brings us back to the issue of neutrality and the dilemma of a secular as opposed to a religious point of view. It may be asked whether the advocates of methodical atheism or agnosticism confuse ontological and epistemological neutralism. It is generally accepted by both scholars of religion and theologians that they cannot make scientific statements about the existence of God, so they confine their study to humans who believe in God and the analysis of conceptualizations of God. But one cannot know and understand religious beliefs and practices without a religious paradigm, which does not mean that the researcher shares the believers’ religious convictions (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 17-18). For this reason I hesitate to agree with James Cox (2003: 30-31), who proposes methodological conversion as an alternative to methodological atheism.

Methodological conversion, according to Cox, signifies that I can only understand others if I convert to their point of view, even if only temporarily. To a certain extent this is what Van Binsbergen (2003: 155-193) did when he not only studied sangomas but actually became one. Seen from the inter-cultural model, the religious scholar’s understanding of others will most often be partial, an ‘understanding misunderstanding’ (Mall 2000: 15-17) or a ‘working misunderstanding’ (Wijsen & Tanner 2000: 34). This also implies that we opt for a position between ‘total translatability’ and ‘radical un-translatability’ (Mall 2000: 14). When Mazrui and Mazrui (1995: 2) state that Swahili facilitated a diffusion of Christians and Islam in East Africa and therefore can be called a ecumenical language (Mazrui & Mazrui 1998: 171), they are a bit too optimistic about the possibility of intercultural communication and understanding. The use of language is to a large extent dependent on its context. The more distant the context of the communicators, the lower the level of understanding (Gutt 1991: 97).

This brings me to my last point. In the inter-cultural model interreligious relations are perceived not in terms of identity or alterity, but in terms of analogy. The other is similar, but not the same. This facilitates intercultural understanding,

albeit mostly partial understanding. The other is not so strange that understanding is almost impossible; nor is he or she perceived as so identical that differences are not taken seriously. I wish to add to the intercultural model that the other is also perceived as a resource to serve one’s interests, and that relations are good as long as there are common interests. Ali Mazrui (2006: 231-232) stresses this point when he urges that Muslims and Christians not only need each other, but in fact fight together in a common struggle against materialism and secularism. However true this may be, today’s companion can be tomorrow’s competitor, as scholars of religion can learn from the history of interreligious relation in Nigeria and – to a lesser extent – Tanzania (Wijsen & Mfumbusa 2004: 41-44). This is the ambiguity and complexity of interreligious relations that we have to deal with in interreligious studies. Therefore, education on interreligious relations should also focus on conflicting interests and power relations (Asad 1983).

C O N C L U S I O N

In his recent study on Islam between globalisation and counter-terrorism Ali Mazrui (2006: 224) says “Africa has had an impressive record of dialogue of cultures and civilizations. This record is now endangered both by internal tensions in Africa and by new external pressures and stresses”. He continues “Speedy action is needed to restore the sense of dignity of Coastal and Muslim Kenyans before Kenyan Islam is radicalised into a new Black Intifadah” (Mazrui 2006: 218). It is my contention that classical approaches to the study of religion are no longer adequate to cope with such complex issues as religious radicalism and counter-terrorism. Maybe in the past, religions could be studied in insular way and then compared, although one may not romanticize Africa’s past as a continent with closed and homogeneous communities (Robertson 1995: 30-35; Hannerz 1992: 217-267). But in our present-day world, a new approach in the study of religions and interreligious relations is needed, an approach that starts from the growing interconnectedness of cultures and religions and that presupposes cultural overlaps as a common ground for inter-cultural understanding. This is what interreligious studies is all about.



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NOTES

¹ The results of my fieldwork were first presented during a lecture that Prof. Jesse Mugambi asked me to give in the University of Nairobi, Kenya, on 16 June 2006. A second draft of this paper was read at an international conference on Peace and Inter-Faith Dialogue, organized by the Spanda Foundation in the Great Hall of Justice, Peace Palace, The Hague – The Netherlands, on 13 October 2006.

² An exception must be made for United States of America's continued under-cover meddling in the internal politics of oil-rich African countries. To a large extent, the same applies to China.

³ Platvoet and Van Rinsum (2003: 131) speak about the period between 1945 and the 1960s. It must be noted that the founding fathers of the departments of religious studies were often clerics such as bishop Stephen Neill and White Father Joseph Donders at the University of Nairobi (Chepkwony 2004: 56).

⁴ It is noteworthy that the same applies to the United Kingdom, where their alma mater was. Some scholars of religion there plead for a return of theology (Hyman 2004) or theological religious studies (D'Costa 1996).

⁵ In a magazine of the sister organization Lumen 2000, published in Swahili in East Africa, it reads: "The objectives of the Decade of Evangelization are to unite all Catholics in the common effort, and to inspire all Christians to the common goal of giving Jesus Christ the 2000th birthday gift of a world more Christian than not".

⁶ Probably the first confrontation between the West and the Muslim world occurred in 1099 when Jerusalem was taken after the first crusade. But that crusade in its turn was a reaction on the Muslims' conquest of southern Spain, four centuries earlier (Hall 1992: 287).

⁷ An example is the numerous videotapes, books and brochures spread over all of Africa by Ahmed Deedat (1993, 1994). Ahmed Hoosen Deedat was born in India in 1918 but immigrated to South Africa with his father soon after his birth. He dedicated his life to defending Islam against distortion by Christian missionaries. A comparison with the preaching of the German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke (Gifford 1996: 199-204) would, I expect, reveal many similarities.

⁸ In many countries in Africa, religious statistics are highly politicised, so the figures are unlikely to be accurate. In Tanzania it was claimed for many years that one third of the population is Christian, one third Muslim and one third indigenous believers. At present 40% of Tanzanians are said to be Christians, 40% Muslims and 20% adherents of Indigenous Religion. But again one has to question whether these percentages are based on reliable statistics, or on a political desire to preserve harmony between the largest religions.

⁹ I visited only academic institutions with a department of religious studies and/or a faculty of theology. Other institutions have programmes related to our subject, such as the ethics course offered at Strathmore University Nairobi, an Opus Dei initiated institution, and the course on intercultural communication and international relations offered at the United States International University in Nairobi.

¹⁰ In 2003 the National Agenda for Peace project of the National Council of Churches in Kenya organised a three-day interfaith consultation on violence and building cultures of peace, with contributions from the perspectives of African Indigenous Religions and African Instituted Churches, as well as Christian, Muslim and Hindu religious perspectives (Getui & Musyoni 2003).

¹¹ These activities were happening all along, but they remained hidden or were disregarded. Now interreligious encounters are advertised and organised in public places.

¹² Just as an illustration, the first two volumes of the Ecumenical Symposium of Eastern African Theologians contain no contribution on interreligious dialogue (Ndung'u & Mwaura 2005; Chepkwony 2006), nor do the publications of the Kenya Chapter of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (Wamue & Getui 1996; Getui & Ayanga 2002) and the Kenya Chapter of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Getui & Obeng 1999; Getui & Theuri 2002). Likewise, the investigation into *Faces of African Theology* at the beginning of the 21st century of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (Ryan 2003) contains not one contribution on interreligious dialogue. The same applies to the recent update of *A Comparative Study of Religions* (Mugambi 1990), entitled *Religions in Eastern Africa under Globalization* (Mugambi & Getui 2004).

¹³ It is enlightening to point at rigorism trends in early African Christianity. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1986: 18) observes: The early North African church was not monolithic, but split into various parties. "One insight commonly predominated", says Oduyoye (1986: 19), namely "the willingness to die for one's beliefs". In a certain way, early African Christians were uncompromising, a "church of martyrs". Traditional rigorous attitudes towards the gods were reinforced by biblical statements (Oduyoye 1986: 20).



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I - PREMISE: THE HUMAN BEING AS THE QUESTIONING BEING

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A - *NOSTRA AETATE* AND THE QUESTIONS ON HUMAN EXISTENCE¹

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL DOCUMENT *NOSTRA AETATE* (ROME, 28TH OCTOBER, 1965) opened the ecclesial universe to the non-Christian religions for the first time. In the ecclesial milieu non-Christian religions have been looked upon from afar for a long time, mostly viewed with diffidence and explicit condemnation, as the dominion of non-salvation and perdition. It is useful here to recall the Augustinian ideal of the *massa damnatorum*. St Augustin (d. 430), the ‘Doctor of Grace’ (*Doctor gratiae*) did not shy away from the prospect that the vast majority of human beings should end up as firewood in hell for the simple fact that they were not part of the Christian flock. The well-known theologoumenon *Extra Ecclesia nulla salus* (lit., out of the Church there is no salvation) had long since occupied the faith horizon of Christians, mostly in a very restrictive, even exclusive meaning.

In the Second Vatican Council, the Church acknowledged for the first time in the most explicit and authoritative way that outside its visible borders there is the possibility of salvation. Such a new position, the fruit of a long and laborious theological work, has found common acceptance in the large theological literature developed in the after-Council. Thus, the Council document, *Nostra Aetate*, together with other Council documents, surely signaled an epochal turn for the Catholic Church, opening her up and orienting her toward the new horizons of the interreligious dialogue. After the Council a number of other official ecclesial documents have appeared fostering the interreligious dialogue². Among them we mention here the document *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), which is perhaps the most comprehensive one. In it four forms of dialogue are proposed (n. 42): the dialogue of life, of action, of theological exchange, and of religious experience “[...] where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God, the Absolute”³.

¹³ University of Nairobi. Calendar 1997 – 2000: 517-518. No later copy of the Calendar was available. But I was assured that the program in religious studies did not change fundamentally.

¹⁴ At present (June 2006) neither of the two universities employ a Muslim staff member to teach Islamic studies, because the academic credentials of Muslim candidates were doubtful. Islamic studies is taught by Christians and by Muslim student chaplains at both universities.

¹⁵ Wamue (2004: 369) reports that the department wants to expand in various fields, such as languages, ethical and theological studies, African and cultural studies, Oriental and comparative religious studies. Interreligious studies are not mentioned according to Clifford Geertz (1973: 93), the ‘model of’ stresses manipulation of symbolic structures so as to bring them in line with pre-established, non-symbolic systems. The ‘model for’ stresses manipulation of non-symbolic systems in terms of the relationships expressed by symbols. These two meanings of the term ‘model’ are just different aspects of the same basic concept. “Culture patterns have an intrinsic double aspect,” says Geertz (1973: 93): “They give meaning [...] to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves.”

¹⁶ According to Clifford Geertz (1973: 93), the “model of” stresses manipulation of symbolic structures so as to bring them into line with pre-established, non-symbolic systems. The ‘model for’ stresses manipulation of non-symbolic systems in terms of the relationships expressed by symbols. These two meanings of the term ‘model’ are just different aspects of the same basic concept. “Culture patterns have an intrinsic double aspect,” says Geertz (1973: 93): “They give meaning [...] to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves.”

¹⁷ At present there are chairs for interreligious or Inter-faith studies at Xavier University, Cincinnati, the University of Birmingham and the University of Oslo.



However, it seems that, among all that was said on such an issue, little weight has been given to the *Preamble of Nostra Aetate*, considered perhaps too generic and quite obvious. On the contrary, such *Preamble* deserves greater consideration because the questions it poses have been overlooked, the interreligious dialogue has lost a great deal of its seriousness, being too often reduced to a superficial exchange of opinions without any commitment, degenerating even, many a time, into opportunistic propaganda.

The *Preamble* of the Council document speaks of religions as answers to the fundamental questions that ‘deeply disturb the human heart’ that concern the meaning of its existence. It says:

“Humans expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in past times, deeply stir the human hearts: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible Mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?” (*Nostra aetate* #1)

These are just some of the fundamental questions every human being has to face. In the Vatican document they are mentioned just as some instances of that incessant questioning and that radical problematics that cut across all human existence, constituting, one can say, the very fabric of the human being, as such (*qua talis*). In fact, a human being that would not pose himself such questions would cease to be ‘human’. The Council document presents an important aspect of the interreligious dialogue here, which in my view is the very starting point of every serious interreligious dialogue. We humans enter into dialogue because we are under the pressure of such constant questioning, such radical problematics that cuts across our human existence. In fact, the meaning of our existence depends on the answer to such questions.

1-2 - QUESTIONING: HUMAN DIMENSION AND DIVINE CALL

The human being is the being that questions. He questions first about the meaning of his life. And his questioning expands toward the meaning of Being in general. The two questions, about himself and about Being, are strictly correlated. There is no true answer to one of them without answering the other. This fact has been largely expounded on in modern philosophical and theological thinking⁴.

Subhuman species, like the animals, seem to look for their happiness in the satisfaction of some immediate needs and natural instincts instead, such as nourishment, mating, begetting, and so forth. However, even such a view should be

given more reflection, since Paul (Rom 8, 18-25) speaks of a “wailing like the pangs of birth giving” cutting across the whole of creation, and of an expectation of ‘redemption’ as the most intimate aspiration of all creatures. Such a text could open new and wider horizons about the meaning of the universe, still to be explored. In any case, it appears quite clear that the human being, in antithesis to the other animals, has from his very beginning always manifested an unsatisfied curiosity, an incessant search going beyond the limited horizons of purely animal needs and instincts. This is because he is pushed by an incessant and unsatisfied search for the meaning of his own existence.

According to such an understanding, a new definition of the human being could be proposed, parallel to the classical one given by Aristotle, who defined the human as a ‘rational (*logikòs*) animal’. The human being could be better described to be in its essence, a ‘questioning being’ or ‘a being in endless search’. Such unrelenting search, such endless problematising of all appears to be an essential feature of the human constitution as such (*qua talis*), distinguishing him from all other beings.

In fact, the beings inferior to humans, like the animals, the plants and the minerals, seem to move as if pushed by pure physical, instinctual forces, imprinted in their nature in a fixed, determined way. They can be described as being in a state before any kind of questioning. On the other hand, the beings superior to the humans, like the angels, are supposed to be in a state of a clear, luminous and perpetual vision of the truth. Thus, they can be described as being in a state beyond any questioning. Nonetheless, in this instance a deeper and more thorough vision of reality could show that all created beings as such are pushed by an ontological, radical and unavoidable question. This is the question about their ontological foundation, in the end, the question about the Absolute as the ultimate Ground of all, since all come from Him and all are oriented to Him. Thus, as many philosophies have pointed out, the whole universe is in a perpetual movement that originates from and is oriented towards its ultimate Ground, the Absolute. Here, however, we step into deep ontological questions that lie outside the purpose of the present paper.

In conclusion, one can say that the human being, differently from all other beings, is the being ‘that questions, that asks questions’. He is the being that after each answer always poses ever more questions: he is the ‘questioning’ being, par excellence. He moves on in a perpetual questioning, in an incessant search for the meaning of his own existence as well as of the beings around him. One has to add; he will be so, as long as he continues to be ‘human’[...] Perhaps one day he could cease to be ‘human’. One day, perhaps, the growing technocratic tyranny could reduce him to a simple tool of producing and consuming things,

without any horizon left beyond the manipulable world of the technical. Maybe then, the aphorism I have been repeating many a time, will come true: “The human being has created the machine, and has turned into its image and likeness”. Then, the human being will cease to be ‘human’ to become possibly a perfect robot that works, produces and consumes inside a perfect robotized system. In such a system, existence will be a pure operative function, always interchangeable with other parts of the supreme robotic machine. In that case, the human-robot will have ceased to be ‘human’. It will ask no more about the meaning of its existence. This will have already been predetermined for it by the total, supreme Super-robot who will fix each human-robot as one of its operative functions. The human being, having been reduced to a pure robotic unity, will need to think about itself no more. It will have to work as long as its operative capacity will continue. After that, it will have to disappear without regrets, as other operative units, technically more advanced, will come in and continue in a better way its robotic function.

Will this be the last destiny of humankind, as far as it appears to our perceptible human horizon? These are ominous questions that weigh heavily on our human existence. Many thinkers indicate such a direction as an actual possibility and many manifestations of the mass culture around us seem to suggest that we are not far away from some dramatic aspects of such a possible robotic future for humankind.

It is in the light of such reflections that appears, in my view, the utility but also the necessity to take up again the words of the Council about the ‘human questioning’ as the fundamental and the founding existential horizon of the religious answer. The Council looks to religions as answers to the existential questions and riddles of the human being, as such. This position is not only of eminently modern and actual concern but also extremely important in all religious issues, and therefore also in interreligious dialogue.

The human questioning about existential meaning and the human quest about religion are not unrelated processes, but strictly connected in the process of becoming ‘human’. It thus appears that religion, and so mysticism in it, is not free ‘optional’ good, but it makes up the living, pulsing core of the human search of becoming ever more ‘human’. Without it, the fall of humans into a universal “robotism” seems almost unavoidable.

Besides, if thoroughly examined, such human questioning shows to be a Divine call in the end, inscribed and imprinted in the inmost core of the human heart. Such a questioning is the first sign of God’s presence in the human conscience, and thus the first revelation of God to humans. The human being asks questions because he feels himself to be questioned by his own existential Ground,

which is God. The human being perceives that he is ‘responsible’ because he is aware that he must answer for his existence, and that his existence is not ‘his’, but that it has been given to him as a vocation and a duty, and ultimately, as a ‘responsibility’. Reaching down to the roots of his questioning, the human being becomes aware (even if not always in a clear, explicit way) of the presence of Someone that questions him, and that this Someone questions him because it is He who gave him the gift of existing: a free gift, but at the same time also an earnest duty and an unavoidable responsibility. The human being becomes all the more aware that he has to exist, he has to fulfil his existence and he is responsible for it. And this to the point that, even if he decided not to exist, such a choice would already be an answer to the call to existing and its meaning. It would be a negative answer, but always an answer for which he is responsible and therefore liable for its consequences.

2 - THE EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS AND THE SPIRITUAL HORIZONS OF HUMANKIND IN OUR TIME

2-1 - THE GLOBALIZATION AND ITS CHALLENGES⁵

The existential questioning of the human being always appears mediated by the ‘historical time’ (*kairos*) in which he exists. Human being is essentially a historical being, always reaching for himself through the historical milieu in which he is situated. History is not just a succession of neutral moments, all equal. History is an existential process that advances towards ever newer and wider horizons of comprehension through which the human being discovers himself, and thus he can either fulfil or destroy himself. So, human history runs under the sign of a basic ambiguity, between success and failure, salvation and damnation. This ambiguity will be resolved only in its final exit. Every human being finds himself situated in such a historical process, and only in interaction with it can he really find and fulfil himself.

One could also add that such a historical contextualisation is not typical solely of human beings. Also at the level of physics, for instance, one finds that every impulse of energy, every particle of mass exists in relation to the whole of the energy-mass system. In the energy-mass system all constituents are in reciprocal relation, so that any variation of the energy-mass system inevitably influences the relations between its single elements. Such a variation necessarily happens in time. Thus, the atom measured now is not the same measured yesterday, because the whole energy-mass system has varied from yesterday to today. A true universal knowledge of the universe should take into consideration the total variations of the energy-mass system in time. Is that possible? Is it possible to reach a global measure of the whole energy-mass system in time, without having variations

again through our measurements? These are complicated questions scientists pose, and their answers seem to be ever more an aporetic riddle.

In any case, from all this it appears quite clear that history plays a fundamental role in all things, but in particular in humans. Human history is the history of the 'human questioning', or of the human as 'question', that is, it is the history of the rising, developing and self-overcoming of the human's quest toward his full self-comprehension and self-realization as 'human'. But, as we have said, such history always runs under the threat of a basic ambiguity. The human being in fact is not a prefixed and predetermined being, but a being that can always dispose of himself in freedom, and therefore can always choose between his self-realization and his self-destruction, between his salvation and damnation.

From this it becomes apparent that each of us finds himself or herself inevitably plunged into a definite historical horizon in which the quest for meaning and self-realization must be carried out. We all are inside the actual human horizon of self-comprehension, but we are also its active constituents, in an inextricable interconnection. Moreover, this horizon is never a static datum, but varies continuously in the constant process of the 'rising, developing and self-overcoming' of the human quest for meaning.

Hence, the importance of pointing out some traits of the cultural-existential horizon of our time appears. The present historical epoch, which we have entered some years ago, has been defined as the era of globalisation, because it is characterised by an ever-expanding marketing overcoming all social, cultural, political barriers at a global level. Alongside with many positive aspects, there are also many negative sides that are threatening the life of all humankind. We will mention here some of these negative aspects that concern our present topic, namely: the ever expanding global marketing with the consequent cultural massification, the increasing fragmentation of the traditional values in a kind of ethical-religious atomism, the rising of new cultural and religious tribalisms, that put into question the pacific coexistence of the human global village.

A - BETWEEN GLOBAL MARKETING AND CULTURAL 'MASSIFICATION'

After the fall of the totalitarian ideologies, Marxism in particular, it seems that now only one ideology dominates the globe: neo-liberal capitalism, pushed forward by its supporting centre, the United States of America. This neo-liberal capitalism strives towards a planetary dominion, submitting and driving out all opposing forces. It struggles to create a unified global domain in which it can let loose its inbred dynamics, i. e., the free competition for the conquest of the global market. It is the policy of this global marketing that dictates the new rules

for the whole world, without any consideration of the human cost such an enterprise entails. We have now reached a point at which the individual nations find themselves impotent to oppose the increasingly absolute and dominant power of global capitalism.

One of the most dreadful consequences of the present global marketing, denounced long since by many thinkers, is the so called 'cultural massification, or mass culture' that is spreading out to every corner of the globe. Human culture is now used to serve, support and justify the global marketing, at the mercy of a most dire instrument, commercial propaganda, which almost entirely dominates our cultural horizon. Any cultural expression that does not reach a satisfactory level of marketing is doomed. All cultural values must now be necessarily transformed into 'marketing products' if they are to survive in the global village. Marketing vocabulary has entered all fields, even the religious one. One talks now without any reticence of the 'religious market', regulated by the law of supply and demand, much as any other commercial product. Cultural works, ancient and modern, are now reprocessed into products to be offered on the market of our global village, but emptied of the existential-symbolic contents they had in their original historical context. Mass tourism is a typical example of the way in which ancient cultures, rich in so many and deep symbolic meanings, have been reduced to mere 'commercial packets' to be consumed in the most economic way possible. Ancient myths, charged with the deepest existential meanings (e. g., the names of ancient divinities such as Venus, Mars etc., and heroes, such as Hercules, Alexander the Great etc.), have now been reduced to banal trademarks for better commercialisation of one product or another in our global market⁶.

B - RELIGIOUS-ETHICAL FRAGMENTATION

The present global market is witnessing an alarming consequence of such 'marketing culture': the fragmentation, one could say atomisation, of all ethical and religious values imbedded in traditional institutions such as the family, the Church, and many other forms of social life. Such values have been the main support to humankind since its dawn. Now, in our globalised societies a fragmented, atomised human being emerges, thrown into the sea of the global market without any principle of internal resistance. The single individual has now been freed from any point of reference, other than himself. He refuses any kind of commands and regulations, from above or from below, from inside or outside. He wants to build his own experience, being a law unto himself, without any interference from outside. The principle of *do it yourself* has become now the universal law in all human fields, even in the ethical-religious one. And the *self-service* regulation dominates the global market, even in the religious domain.

This fragmented and atomised individual of the post-modern world seems to be the extreme outcome of the centrality given to the human individual (the 'turn to the subject'), that has been a basic trait of the modern thinking⁷.

Many thinkers, however, have pointed out that exactly such a fragmented and atomised individual, pushed towards the most extreme individualism, has become the most suitable client for the technocratic-consumerist society of our post-modern time. Such an isolated individual appears omnipotent in his individualistic domain, but actually he is a very docile and malleable instrument at the mercy of the consumerist society, and completely in the thrall of its requests. This fact can be easily observed in our daily life, in the models of behaviour propagated by the media that determine our choices. In fact, such a fragmentation and atomisation of the human being, with the total obliteration of the traditional ethical-religious values, appears to be the more suitable and almost necessary premise (whether carried out on purpose or not, this is another question) for the increasing total 'robotisation' of humankind. And it seems quite likely that the great controllers of the world economy and their interests are ultimately manoeuvring this process. These great controllers have become the supreme instances ruling the present globalisation process to which everything must submit. And it is well known what a war without quarter is going on up there in the high spheres of the world economy for the total control of the global market.

Over the course of history, humankind has known many different cultures. These have constituted the vital sap for many civilizations, giving them the spiritual strength and ideals from which they drew their vitality, even in the most troubled times of their history. Now, those human cultures are being levelled down and absorbed into a unique worldwide model of standardized culture: the market culture. This latter seems to have been created on purpose and is forced upon all through a stifling propaganda aiming at putting human society at the service of 'global consumerism'.

Now, however, humankind is becoming increasingly aware that such a process of consumerist robotisation is leading to an exploitation and an impoverishment of the human environment, not only the cultural but also the physical one, to a degree never seen before in human history. The physical habitat is exploited in the greediest and most devastating way as an unlimited source of supplies for global consumerism, without any care or respect for nature and the actual coping capabilities of our planet. This latter already seems destined to an ever-increasing state of deterioration, almost without hope of recovery.

Thus, we are witnessing a process of global, and almost inevitable, decadence leading to a total decline of human values that may cause humankind to return to

a stage labelled by Carl Jung as 'modern barbarism'. With such a term he intended to indicate some sub-human behaviours that were becoming ever more characteristic of human beings in our consumerist societies. It is enough to stroll around in the jungles of our metropolitan cities, or to watch the programs of our modern information media, to recognize the signs of the drive towards a new barbarism, spreading throughout every quarter of our global village.

C - THE RISE OF NEW CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS 'TRIBALISMS'

On the other side, as a reaction against the present ethical-religious fragmentation of globalised humankind, but also as a refusal of the past absolutist ideologies, a new 'cultural and religious tribalism' is spreading in our globalised world.

Through such 'tribalism' many human groups try to preserve their sense of identity, recovering their traditional cultural and religious values threatened by the dominant cultural massification.

Samuel Huntington, a well known politologist, in a famous article that went on to become a book with the title *The Clash of civilization*, has long since warned that in the future clashes among the different human groups will no longer happen on the basis of some universal, totalising ideologies, as was the case in our past. From now on, the clashes among peoples will occur out of a return to the traditional values that have shaped their life in history⁸. Recovering past values should be in itself a positive process to stress one's own identity. However, when such a self-identity is achieved in a 'tribal' way, that is, in a spirit of exclusivity and hostility toward other groups and cultures, then new forms of cultural and religious tribalism come into being.

Now, these new tribalisms, supported by strong political and economic interests, easily become sources of long conflicts and ferocious wars, with the most catastrophic and unforeseeable consequences for all, as some recent happenings prove. One may remember what happened in the past few years in countries such as the former Yugoslavia, in Africa, in Indonesia, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and so forth. In the face of such devastating conflicts, it has become all the more urgent and imperative for all to become aware and to make others aware of the tribalistic currents upsetting and threatening our global village. A call to work together to eradicate any tribalistic trend is urgently needed.

Religions represent a decisive factor here as well. Religions are at risk of being caught up into the tribal clashes of global humankind, as happened with many forms of imperialism that have dominated past human societies. Now, in our global world, wars will not be waged between different villages as in the past but with a no less ferocity, between the quarters, the streets of the same global

village. Therefore, it is quite important that every religion realises the danger of becoming an instrument of this new tribal violence. Every religion is called on to work in full awareness to overcome first of all its own tribalistic trends, retrieving and reviving primarily the great richness of wisdom present in its own tradition.

It has been often repeated (as in the programme for global ethics proposed by Hans Küng) that there will not be peace among nations if there is no peace among religions. Therefore, all religions of humankind are now urgently called to support the principles of a 'global humanism', on which peaceful relationships of coexistence can be built among peoples, overcoming the old demons of 'tribal' mentality. An urgent conversion is now required from all, starting from the bottom, from each single individual, to be extended then to the whole of humanity. One cannot possibly expect real changes in the exterior structures if there is not first a personal commitment on the part of every individual to change his own thinking.

In our global village, great importance must be given to the Islamic quarter, for its past history as well as for its present. It represents a population of more than one billion in fast and continuous expansion. This quarter is at present agitated by strong fundamentalist and extremist trends, representing a threat to the peaceful coexistence with other neighbourhoods. It is, therefore, extremely important to work so that the Islamic quarter may also become a positive and constructive factor for a peaceful life with the rest of the global village, overcoming the demons of its religious tribalism. This is one of the most weighty challenges our world faces and has become the most urgent goal of interreligious dialogue.

2-2 - RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND ITS ISSUES

Alongside with the challenges posed by the present situation of globalisation, humanity lives inside a more ancient and vast existential horizon: that of religious pluralism. This also poses many questions, which every religion is urgently called to answer without excuses.

Many are the issues arising from religious pluralism. Is it to be considered a positive or negative fact, and on what ground? Is it compatible with the self-identity every religion and every believer has? Does such a religious pluralism necessarily lead to a religious relativism and finally to indifference (usually expressed in sentences such as: all religions are the same, one is just like the other!)? Or is it possible to take a more responsible stand? But what change of mentality would this attitude imply? This is hardly an exhaustive list of the questions concerning religious pluralism, which is a very vast topic of research. I only intend to point out some of them here, hinting at possible suitable answers⁹.

In human history we do not find 'the Religion' (that is an absolutely clear, evident, unique Religion for all), but rather 'many religions'. Humankind has found itself from its very beginning thrown into an existential situation in which a plurality of religions existed. Hence, the religious pluralism appears in it, as a historical fact and a historical datum, and 'historical data' cannot be ignored. On the contrary, they are there as if to challenge our openness to reality and our understanding of it as it is, and not as we would like it to be. The latter stand would amount to a quite childish and simplifying attitude toward reality. Therefore, we have to take into account the historical reality as it is without pretext and search for a meaning for it as it is. This is the first challenge religious pluralism poses to all believers of all religions.

One can add the fact that religious pluralism becomes all the more problematic exactly for those who, such as Christians, Muslims and others, believe that there is an 'absolute revelation' in human history, a revelation that is not just a casual, and thus, always contingent, accumulation of human religious opinions, but a precise indication about the human destiny coming from its First Origin and Absolute Ground: God himself. This is extremely important. Religion does not simply touch the periphery of the human being, as do other human domains such as politics, economy, art, and such. In these domains a multiplicity of opinions is not only desirable, but also necessary. Religion touches the fundamental core of human existence instead, where the definitive meaning of the human being is in question, and thus his salvation or damnation. Religion comes in at the level where the human being is called to take a stand in front of the Absolute, and so to take an absolute position in front of his own existence. For this reason religious pluralism has always posed and continues posing grave questions to all, but in particular to those who care about religion, as imperative indication of the ultimate destiny of humankind in general and of every single human being.

Under the urge of such (more or less conscious) issue, throughout human history there have been several attempts to unify the 'religious fact', and give a meaning to a history that, at first sight, seems to be quite fragmented, contradictory and illogical. Many religions have tried to reduce religious pluralism to their own terms, stating that in the end all religions express only one truth (evidently coinciding with one's own religion), even if such a truth has been expressed in different terms, because of the different cultures in which each religion has grown.

For instance, in Hinduism one often hears the expression 'the perennial religion' (*sanātana dharma*), coinciding in the end with the core of Hinduism itself, of which all other religions would be just regional expressions, limited to a definite cultural milieu. In the same way, Buddhism talks about the 'quiddity of

Buddha', or of the 'Buddhity', as a fundamental reality existing in all human beings, at least in a latent state, and which every religion is supposed to make come to light, to full awareness. Islam, on its part, has developed the idea of 'natural religion' (*din al-fitra*), as the original, pure religion (coinciding evidently with Qur'anic monotheism), before any subsequent corruption in the human history. In particular, among some Sufis, such as al-Hallaj and Ibn 'Arabi, one very often comes across the idea of the 'unity of religions' (*wahdat al-adyan*), according to which all religions express, in the end, a unique fundamental message: that of the Divine Unity, of which Islam is, evidently, the most explicit, clearest and definitive formulation. Also some Fathers of the Church, such as St Justin and St Augustin, have considered Christianity to be the 'original, natural religion' at the beginning of humankind, before its corruption into many superstitions.

From this, one can clearly see that the pretension of being the 'absolute religion' is not a typical trait of Christianity, as many still think in a quite superficial way. The claim to be the 'absolute religion', on the contrary, appears to be a common trait of all great world religions.

In recent times, some Christian theologians have put forward the idea religious patterns or paradigms that could make a sense of the phenomenon of religious pluralism. Some of them (such as Karl Barth, Hendrik Kraemer and others) have talked of exclusivism. According to this idea, there is only one true historical religion (obviously the Christian one), while all others are the fruit of human hubris and corruption and therefore false. Others (such as Karl Rahner and the majority of catholic theologians) prefer to talk of inclusivism. According to this idea all religions derive their salvific validity from one of them, thought of to be the absolute and normative for all, and this one religion would obviously be the Christian one. More recently, there has been a lot of discussion about what was called the 'reductionist pluralism' (put forward by some theologians such as John Hick, Paul Knitter and others from the Reformed Churches). According to it there is no absolute religion in human history. All historical religions are equally valid as particular, relative expressions of a basic theocentrism, which is supposed to be common to all, but differing in its formulation according to the different cultural milieus. Thus, the Chinese speak of the Tao, the Indians of Brahman, the Jews of Yahweh, Muslims of Allah, Christians of Christ, but the reality meant is only One.

However, among scholars a degree of scepticism prevails now about such 'pre-fabricated theological paradigms'. We have become now much more aware that every paradigm is insufficient to contain the whole reality of different religious experiences. The religious phenomenon is too complex a reality to be reduced into some abstract patterns in which none of them fully finds itself.

In any case, one must acknowledge that religious pluralism remains a serious challenge for all, primarily for those who intend to have a real comprehension of the religious history of humankind, without discount or reduction. All the different essays, made to reduce this phenomenon either to a pure negative product of human wickedness or to a minimal denominator common to all, have proved to be highly unsatisfactory. Making all religions collapse into the vague idea of the Divine Indistinct or the Indistinct Divine only increases confusion, and does not give a rational account of religious pluralism.

On the Christian side, one notices that theology has begun now to take into more serious consideration the historical fact of religious pluralism as 'a positive, providential will' of God for humankind. Though keeping to the centrality of Christ, Christian theology feels that it cannot ignore the massive historical presence of other religions. These two sides of the question must be affirmed together and not denied or watered down in an amorphous concordism, as reductionist pluralism has done.

However, in spite of all the theological reflection on religious pluralism (in particular in the work of Jacques Dupuis), one has to admit that heretofore no satisfactory theological solution to the question has been given on the Christian side. We are still in a stage of research and one can hope that the present *colloquium* may help to make steps forward.

B ~ BETWEEN IDENTITY AND OTHERNESS¹⁰

Talking about the religious phenomenon one should always make clear that in this field there is no absolute point of view that can be recognized by all as comprehending all other points of view. Every point of view in the religious domain, even the one that claims to be the more universal and absolute, the one that tries to reduce differences to a minimum common denominator to all (as the before mentioned reductionist theocentrism of John Hick, Paul Knitter, and others), even this one is necessarily a 'particular' point of view that only asserts itself as a new religious vision of humankind beside others.

The basic fault of such a reductionist vision is that in it every religion feels to be 'squeezed', mutilated, as it were, deprived of some of its essential traits, without which it cannot recognize its true identity. How can Hinduism recognize itself without its basic reference to the Veda? How can a Buddhist without referring to the experience of Buddha? And how can a Christian, without the reference to the singularity of the person of Jesus? And how can a Muslim, without referring to the Qur'an and the Prophet Mohammad? And so on. It is not by reducing differences that one facilitates a true understanding among religions. It is not by making

the Brahman of Hinduism, the Tao of Taoism, the Buddha of Buddhism, the Yahweh of the Bible, the God Father of Christ, and the Allah of the Qur'an collapse into the same common pot of a generic idea of God, or better of a Divine Indistinct, that relationships of understanding and dialogue are facilitated. On the contrary, in this way each religion feels to be mutilated and in the end, betrayed and distorted in its own specific experience; in a way sold out, to a generic idea of God or of the Divine Indistinct.

52 On the contrary, it is in taking the religious 'differences' in their full earnestness and meaning that we put ourselves on the path to a true interreligious encounter. It would seem to be self-evident, but very often one forgets the fact that a true dialogue presupposes partners that are really different and not homologous from the start. All essays done to base interreligious dialogue on the reduction of differences through a superficial and generic concordism prove neither to have solid theoretical ground nor to have brought about significant practical results.

Thus, one has to affirm the diversity existing among religions. One must recognize that each religion has the right to its own irreducible identity. Moreover, one has to say that it is exactly in assuming the 'otherness' of the 'other' in all earnestness that one finds the key to understand one's own identity in an ever deeper way. Otherness and identity do not necessarily exclude each other, neither do they cancel each other. On the contrary, they call for and strengthen each other. Self-comprehension is not obliterated, but is amplified through openness to the other, the different.

A more holistic vision of the religious experience is needed here, beyond any relativistic and reductionistic prejudice. One should also underline that, contrary to many opinions found even among scholars, the religious experience should not be thought of as an undifferentiated, almost abstract entity (*quid*) existing in itself, that only afterwards is specified, shaped and expressed according to different forms of thinking and language taken on from various cultural contexts. The religious experience is not the experience of a 'Divine Indistinct' that is then named differently according to the different languages. Such a 'Divine Indistinct', in my view, reminds us too much of the famous 'Hegelian night', in which all cows are black. A more enlightened and deeper analysis shows quite clearly that the religious experience is, from its beginning, a vital experience and as such, it is always born in a specific context. It is like life. Life is not a static thing or an abstract principle, but a dynamic energy in continuous movement of growing. In the same way, one must say that the religious experience is born in living, concrete, particular experiences, coming from within the different religious traditions, each one with its own irreducible originality. Thus, the Hinduist experience is not the Buddhist one, nor is the Jewish the Christian, and so forth and vice-versa. It is starting

from its living context that each religious experience must find itself, progress and expand, opening itself up to other different religious experiences. And it is exactly such an opening to 'what is different' that is a sign of its vitality; that shows that such a religious experience is a living phenomenon and not a static thing. Dialogue represents beyond doubt one of the most important milieus for such a growth and at the same time one of the most significant signs of good health for a true religious experience. A religious experience, incapable of a true dialogue with other religious experiences, will prove to be very limited and probably a sick one.

53 Yet, taking the otherness of the other earnestly, without reduction, does not mean remaining closed in on oneself, in a reciprocal incommunicability. The other, though different, is not a totally foreign and strange or incomprehensible being. Each religious experience, in fact, happens inside the same human horizon, determined by the comprehensive onto-epistemological traits of our common humanity (the human species), of our common existential habitat (the universe) and of our common orientation and ultimate destiny (the transcendence towards the Absolute).

As a matter of fact, all religious experiences of humankind happen inside the same onto-epistemological human horizon of which they intend to be a reading, an interpretation and an explication. Thus, there is always enough human and spiritual space in which the believers of different religions can move towards each other, meet and, in a common effort of openness and comprehension, walk together towards their ultimate goal. The existential questions mentioned in the *Preamble* of the *Nostra Aetate* can be read and understood exactly as such a human horizon, which is common to all religions. Each religion is actually situated and now more than ever it should explicitly situate itself, inside such a common human horizon. In the end, one will verify that it is exactly in meeting religious experiences, different from his own, that he will find or recover his own deepest religious identity.

In the light of all this, religious pluralism appears to be a positive fact in the religious history of humanity, constituting the unavoidable horizon of any true religious experience. Moreover, it appears to be the truest guarantee of human freedom, exactly in its most fundamental choices, the religious choices.

Thus, it is from inside such unavoidable pluralistic horizon that every religion is called upon, now more than ever, to find its own identity in a positive stand towards the otherness of the other. If my identity denies the identity of the other it shows that it is not a true identity, but rather a kind of umbilical or tribal retreat inside one's own particular religious world. My identity is really true if it gives meaning to the otherness of the other, without denying it. We

have to know each other in our diversity and accept each other in our plurality. In such a meeting of identities and diversities we must be able to create true moments of encounter, dialogue and exchange together.

As a Christian I must say that the true identity of my Christian faith does not consist in seeing what is not-Christian as just 'darkness and evil', in this way reducing Christ to the dimensions of a solitary candle shining in the darkness of the world, as in an empty room. To my mind, this is a very reductive vision of Christ's reality. In fact, a very small candle suffices to illuminate the absolute darkness of a room. My Christian faith on the contrary makes me recognize Christ as the Light that from the very beginning 'illuminates every human being' (Jon 1, 9). Thus, in every human being there is the light of Christ. Therefore the lights I find in other religions are true lights and not darkness. And in the vision of my faith they are so precisely because the light of Christ illuminates them all. In this way Christ is 'the light of the world' (Jon 8, 12), not because He obliterates all the other lights, turning them into darkness, but because He confirms and gives true value to all the other lights, being their origin and their foundation. In such a vision Christ appears to be 'the true and unlimited light' shining over all other lights and not just a solitary candle shining in the darkness of a room.

It is in such a view that we can account for the meaning of many Council statements affirming that in Christ "all that is true, good and saint (holy) in all religions is accepted, confirmed and carried to its fulfilment". This is the logic of the theology of Incarnation according to which "the Logos does assume, purify and elevate human nature", and "Grace does perfect and not destroy nature", and "Christ has come not to destroy but to fulfil".

Only in such a vision the different religious experiences are positively accepted and seen in the design of the Divine providence. They are meant to make all humans grow towards a more comprehensive truth, a truth not limited to closed and predetermined patterns, but a truth always open to the surprises of the Absolute. And the Absolute, as such, (and this too should be quite obvious) cannot be conceived as a static, closed datum. On the contrary, exactly because He is the Absolute, He is forever also absolute and unforeseeable Newness. He is also the always Transcendent, the One who always transcends all limits, patterns, formulas, and definitions. In the same way, He is also the always Coming, the One who always overcomes all limited situations and continuously creates new realities, as He says: "See, I renew all things" (Apoc 21, 5).

In conclusion, we must enter in a positive relation with other religions. One will find that in the actual encounter of dialogue beyond all differences there is a vast human and 'Divine' space for further encounter, mutual understanding and discovery, and also for a reciprocal enrichment. In the end, we all

shall find ourselves in our true human identity, as 'pilgrims of the Absolute', on the way towards Him, who is the ultimate Goal of our human pilgrimage, the One that nobody can possess, but Who is calling everybody to Himself in order that He may be "All in all" (1 Cor 15, 28).

C ~ THE FUTURE OF RELIGION OR THE RELIGION OF THE FUTURE: FOUR BASIC REQUESTS FOR ALL RELIGIONS OF OUR TIME.

So far in our reflection we have been examining the religious situation of our time in the light of two realities, or two horizons, that condition its comprehension: globalisation and religious pluralism. From a close examination, some fundamental issues emerge which every religion has to confront if it intends to offer an honest answer to spiritual demands of our time. These issues can be summarized in the four points: each religion is called to revisiting its original message, confronting modernity and its critical mind, entering into a meaningful dialogue with other religions, and committing itself for justice in our world, which is threatened with a loss of its humanity. Let us examine them briefly¹¹.

I ~ REVISITING THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE

Every great religion has its origins in a founding experience and on that basis it is aware of having a message to bear in the world, a message that gives meaning to the life of people accepting it. Such a founding experience, or say the continuous actualisation of its founding message has been the driving force of every religion for centuries. One can cite here, for instance, the experience of Buddha for Buddhists, the encounter with the person of Christ for Christians, the Qur'anic revelation for Muslims, and so on. These religious messages have given faith and hope to millions and millions of people, becoming for them their true *raison d'être*.

However, in the course of history, such an original message has been read, interpreted and applied in different ways. Some were surely legitimate developments and deepening of it, but some others may have been or actually were deviations and compromises that obscured the original meaning of the message. For such reasons, one can see that movements of reform, renewal and revival have always accompanied all religions regardless of place or time, with urgent appeals for a return to its original purity. The history of Christianity, in this instance, is quite an outstanding example. A large number of reform movements, in all places and times, have always agitated its history.

Thus, there is a basic and unavoidable question that forces itself upon every religious tradition: what is the essential core of its founding experience, or what is

its true, original message? How much of it is still alive in the actual reality of a particular religion? What is essential and what is secondary, or aberrant in it?

Such a question cannot be avoided, especially in the actual context of humankind in which so many religious traditions are put in close contact and confrontation with each other. The mere repetition of the past does not offer any satisfying and permanent solution to such questioning. On the contrary, a rigid stand can only and unavoidably lead to spiritual and cultural blockings. And these will easily become, as it is happening now in our present global village, fertile ground for many fundamentalist movements, even in extreme cases for terrorism. These are the modern religious 'tribalisms', mentioned above, a permanent source of tensions and conflict on our planet.

Ultimately every great religious tradition is founded on an original, peculiar religious core that stems from a prime experience. However, such a religious core needs to be continuously taken back, revisited, reinterpreted and actualised through a critical approach to its sources and history. If this is not done, any religion will easily become fossilized in pure legalistic, repetitive, exterior structures, turning out to be empty, lifeless shells in the end.

II - CONFRONTING MODERNITY

The human being is a historical being, necessarily involved in a process of development through stages, which cannot be repeated. These are taking him forward, towards an ultimate goal, which, even if not always clear to his mind, is always present in the deep restlessness of his heart.

Now, the human being of our time is one who has had a fundamental experience; that of the 'coming to age of human reason', as Kant expressed it. Such an important step has marked the transit to the modern era. Through it, the human being has reached a clearer critical and scientific vision of himself, his history and physical environment, going beyond all mythological representations.

As is well known, this was the fundamental experience that matured during the European Enlightenment. Now, such a new critical and scientific vision cannot be discarded, as if it never happened, even if it does not cover the total meaning of human existence. In the post-modern world we now talk of the failure of the totalising rationalistic enterprise of Enlightenment.

Thus, a religion that intends to live in our actual world cannot possibly stop at a mythological vision of reality (as many contemporary thinkers warn), a vision founded in an un-scientific or pre-scientific perception of the universe and its history. In many contemporary religious trends, a desire for an infantile regression to a world made out of 'fairies and elves' can be noticed, in which

one can find easy satisfaction in a simplified vision of things; even resorting to cheap, miraculous, almost magical solutions, especially when touched in his own skin! Such an infantile attitude is a sign of immaturity of reason, even if it still has a strong grip on a great number of people in our scientific, technologically developed societies as proved in many statistical studies.

Each religion has to free itself now from such a mythological mind and infantile attitude, or it will bitterly clash with reality. Some contemporary fundamentalist movements that agitate the religious scene of our time can be explained through such infantile regression that looks for simplified, unproblematic security. This can be proved by contemporary events when such an infantile security is threatened, violence explodes in the most irrational and devastating ways.

Confronting modernity constitutes one of the basic issues every religious tradition has to face if it intends to become a positive part of the present global village. Modernity cannot be seen as an absolute evil to be fought against in all possible ways, as it is said in much religious propaganda. We have experienced in a not so remote past the devastating effects of many anti-modernist trends inside the Catholic Church. The same situation is observable in many contemporary religious movements, inside the Islamic world in particular.

Modernity means the coming of age of human reason, and, in itself, it represents positive human progress. Besides, one can say that faith will be all the more authentic and deeper, the more it is the result of a free, rationally motivated choice. The wrong side of modern rationalism has been the claim of making reason the absolute principle of all. Thus, rationalistic extremisms have been unbridled, bringing upon humankind the most dreadful catastrophes known in its long history: two world wars were fought under the aegis of modern scientism. One can see that, in the end, the idolatry of reason itself also proves to be highly irrational. In conclusion, I think that every religion of our post-modern time is called upon to find now a just balance between faith and reason.

III - ENTERING INTO DIALOGUE WITH OTHER RELIGIONS

Each religion finds itself situated in a world much wider than the circle of its adepts. An incalculable number of people lived on the surface of our planet, loved, hoped, and then passed away from our visible horizon. A great number of religions have been the source of their love, the reason of their lives and, in the end, the hope in their passing away for huge masses of people. Very high values of humanity, culture and spirituality have been developed inside all these religious traditions, values that have been the lifeblood of the great human civilizations of the past; and such values have been left as a common legacy for the whole of humankind.

If one were to consider the whole of that human history as negative, insignificant or worthless, only because those peoples, with their beliefs, ideas and faith, were not part of our 'flock', did not belong to our 'group' or to our 'nation', and so forth, then such an attitude would amount to a condemnation of a great deal of human history. But, in this way, people would ultimately condemn themselves, because they would cut themselves off from a great part of human history, which is part of humankind, as they are part of it.

Also such an attitude of condemnation and refusal of everything that is 'foreign' reveals a typical infantile stand. The child considers his own home and his own family as the 'centre of the universe'. Everything that is foreign to them automatically becomes in his perception 'hostile', a threat to his own world, to be fought against and eliminated.

A religion that intends to become a positive partner of the human global village must overcome such an infantile attitude of mistrust and condemnation towards what is different: the other. The affirmation of one's own truth should not mean the elimination of the truth of the other. The religion of the future cannot possibly be that of a ghetto, of a sect, or a sort of 'tribal' religion. On the contrary, it must be similar to the evangelical tree (Mt 13, 32) where all the birds of heaven can come to find shelter and to build their nest. In such a religion, all human beings should be able to find something that talks to them and enlightens them, at least to discover the deepest and most authentic values of their own religious tradition. Such was the attitude of Christ. Though proclaiming to have come to 'fulfil' the Jewish law, he did proclaim at the same time that not an 'iota' of that law would be obliterated. He wanted to say that whatever was true and valuable in the Jewish law; it will be preserved in his 'new' law. Such should also be the attitude of his followers towards the other religions of the world.

For this reason, a sincere attitude of dialogue towards other religions should become, in my view, a fundamental attitude for every religion that intends to be a positive presence in our global village. I would dare to say that the saint of the future would no more be that of only one religious tradition or community. The saint of the future should be a person whose life has a positive meaning for every religious tradition of the world and is recognized as such by all.

However, to avoid any ambiguity and delusion, a true interreligious dialogue cannot be reduced to mere platonic declarations of good will. Dialogue must be the fruit of a mature critical attitude towards one's own history and that of the others and not of verbal rhetoric, so as to reach a deeper and truer knowledge of itself and the others. Only on such a basis of true mutual knowledge, can there be a true exchange of experiences and ideas, and consequently a true dialogue.

Thus, every religion in the global human village is called upon to be a religion in dialogue with others. Karl Rahner, the great Catholic theologian of the Second Vatican Council, said once that the Christian of tomorrow '[...] will either be a mystic (that is one who has a real experience of God) or will exist no more'. Paraphrasing his sentence, I dare say that the religion of tomorrow will either be a religion of dialogue or it will exist no more, perhaps, because it will have turned into a sect, or a pure human ideology, or a 'tribal' tradition, limited to the closed circle of its adepts.

IV - COMMITTING ITSELF TO JUSTICE IN THE WORLD

Commitment to justice on behalf of all humans is written in clear letters in all three religions of the Abrahamic tradition: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But the same principles can be easily detected also in all great religious traditions, such as Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The historical application of these principles, however, reveals many dark and negative sides in all. No religion has a clean record on this point. All religions have actually known times of violence, one more, another less. Thus, one must avow that no religion is innocent in history in that respect.

Now, commitment to justice has become an urgent and unavoidable issue for the very survival of humankind in our global village. On one hand, modern conscience has highly developed the sense of human dignity and the rights of the human person as such, e. g., the respect of freedom at all levels (freedom of conscience, of speech, of information etc.), the sense of equality among all humans, beyond all possible differences such as race, belief, ideology, and so on. Such awareness of human rights has matured in the modern era through tragic conflicts and events. It cannot and must not be put into question again. It is actually this awareness of human freedom and dignity that is under attack by many contemporary religious and cultural tribalisms, stemming from many fundamentalist movements that are spreading around in our global village, in the Islamic world in particular. It has been noticed that the first thing these fundamentalist movements do when they come to power is to undermine the status of personal rights, forbidding the people to completely exercise them. One should remark, however, that also in the so-called liberal states of the secularised West there are many kinds of occult manipulators and persuaders that threaten the dignity and the freedom of the individual. Human rights, one must recognize, are not granted once and for all, but need to be continuously re-appropriated, especially as regards their practice.

On the other hand, as we have seen above, the process of globalisation is creating a new situation in which the individual can be manipulated and exploited

to a degree never reached before in the long history of humanity. The market globalisation does not automatically entail justice and welfare for all, as some global-capitalists still want to believe. It is not true that “the pursuit of personal private profit will bring about, as by magic, welfare for all”, as many supporters of a pure economic liberal system still proclaim. Statistics show a widening gap between the world of the rich and that of the poor, pointing to an increasing degradation of humankind at all levels with the possible risk of the collapse of its fundamental values, ultimately leading to the possibility of an assured self-destruction. The tremendous progress of science and technology yields to humans, as individuals and societies, powers of manipulation to a degree unthinkable till just some years ago. One may think of genetic manipulation and of all its possible consequences. Moreover, one knows that such a manipulation is carried out most of the time in secret, far from the public control (which is, in fact, deliberately misinformed and manipulated) in order to serve the hidden interests of many economic powers. The development of modern science proves that there is no such a thing as ‘pure science’, consecrated to the pure service of human knowledge and welfare, far from any economic interest. Such a lofty ideal, still propagated by many illustrious names, has proved to be an illusion. An objective look at modern science proves that nearly all scientists have put themselves, in one way or the other, at the service of some political (under ideologies such as nazism and communism) or economic (in the liberal-capitalistic system) interest. The ‘pure’ scientist does not exist. What actually exists is a scientist that is always compromised by some usually unclear interests and, in our days, at the service of the great manipulators of world marketing.

Therefore, a religion that intends to be a positive factor in our global village must be a religion that takes earnestly to heart the defence of the human rights, the dignity of all human persons and of the whole of the human person, starting from the weakest and the most exploited. This will be a sign that its message comes from God who, as He shows in all great religious traditions, is first of all a God of ‘love and mercy’, who takes to heart the destiny of each and all of his creatures, especially the weakest. A serious and active collaboration of all religions in such a field is not only desirable, but necessary, if we are to save humans from a possible dehumanisation in a ‘global robotisation’, according to the afore mentioned saying: “The human being has created the machine and has turned himself into its image and likeness”. Actually, the machine has become the god of humankind, and humans are ever more becoming its servants.

In conclusion, all religions are called upon to commit themselves to the work of justice among in the world at all levels, so that the process of globalisation may amount to more than mere ‘global marketing’; becoming instead ever closer to a ‘global humanisation’ of all and of any individual, through which all

single individuals may reach the highest possible level of being truly ‘human’. This is surely one of the most urgent issues and challenges every religion has to face in our time.

2-3 - MYSTICISM IN THE EXISTENTIAL HORIZON OF HUMANKIND.

Interreligious dialogue, as it has been said above, proves to be extremely important in facing the challenges and meeting the demands of the present process of globalisation. But such a dialogue must start from the core of the religious experience, i.e., the mystical experience. This needs to be clarified.

A - FINDING HUMAN IDENTITY

The term ‘mystic’ and its derivatives have been largely made banal in the present massification of culture forced upon us by global consumerism. The meaning of the term ‘mystic’ has been downgraded and applied to the most banal thing in our consumerist market. Now, one talks without reserve of mysticism of perfumes, cars, football, and such. The term ‘mystic’ has been also overused to indicate what is most extravagant, illogical, strange, paranormal, such as visions, miracles, and the like.

There is a necessity to bring this term back to its original, true and deep meaning. Only some general traits of it can be hinted at here. For more information, one has to refer to specialized research in this subject¹².

The term mystic derives from the Greek *muō* which means ‘to keep silence’, with special reference to the ancient sacred mysteries. Later on, it has been used to mean the deepest reality the human being can attain, what is most secret and hidden, away from and not disposable to the indiscreet curiosity and the superficial interests of the public. Such a deep reality can be told only to those who have ‘ears to hear’ (cf. Mt 13, 9). Thus, mystic means what is most real, most true and hidden in the human heart, where the human being meets the Absolute and with Him celebrates his transforming encounter. Taking in earnest this fundamental dimension of the human being, trying to verify it in daily life, even putting one’s own life at stake, this means entering into the mystical dimension.

Thus, the mystical experience proves to be the heart of religion, and consequently of human experience. Mysticism is not just talk about God, but a concrete encounter with Him, who is the first foundation and also the ultimate purpose of human existence.

It has been noticed by many thinkers that around the end of the past century and the beginning of the present, the twenty-first century, or, in the transit

between the two millennia, the second and the third, there was a large return of, a new interest and a broad quest for the 'mystic'. To this purpose a sentence attributed to the well-known French thinker, André Malraux is often quoted: "The XXith century either will be 'mystic' or it will be no more"¹³. The human being has proved again that he is the being in endless quest of his truest and deepest identity, of his humanity. Mysticism is the true answer to such a quest.

B ~ FACING THE DIVINE MYSTERY

62 Mystical experience shows to be highly dramatic. Actually, in it the radical drama of the human being is summarized and, one could say, embodied. The human being is called to the encounter with his absolute Ground, God, the Absolute Mystery. This is the ultimate aspiration of the human heart and the ultimate goal of the human pilgrimage through time. But, as it has been said above, such an Absolute proves to be at one and the same time what is most indispensable and necessary to the human being as well as what is most independent from him. He can only be received as free gift and grace, far from any human manipulation. A human being can meet the Absolute only where and when He makes Himself available to him.

Thus, the human drama can be summarized in the following terms. The human being is that being which is in search for the deepest and truest sense of his existence, namely, of what is most indispensable and necessary for him. However, he can reach his goal and obtain his purpose only as an absolutely free gift and a grace from Him. This is the true experience of the Absolute that lies at the heart of any mystical experience. This is the paradox any true mystic has to face.

On the other side, the mystical experience takes the human being to a level that is beyond any clear logic and rational formulation. Here, one deals with 'experience' first, that is, with a personal, existential happening, in which the human person comes in touch with the Divine Mystery. In such an encounter, as all mystics of all religious traditions witness, things happen 'that no human eye has ever seen and no human hearing has ever heard' (1 Cor 2, 9). Through such an experience, the mystic finds himself radically and totally transformed.

In fact, mystics who have undergone a true encounter with God, the Absolute, have experienced that all human limits in which our common existence is chained, the limits of space and time, have been in some way overcome. The encounter with the Absolute Reality happens outside of space and time, a Reality that can neither be the possession or dominion of anybody, nor can it be constricted to a particular milieu or culture. At the level of the mystical experience "only the Spirit is the law", says St John of the Cross, and the human being is "adorned with the Divine Attributes" say Sufis.

At any rate, mystics speak a language that only those who have tasted their experience can understand, beyond any rigid rational theological formulations. The mystical experience intends to be, in fact, the experience of the Absolute Reality and not just an abstract talk about it so that only those who have 'eyes to see and ears to hear' can understand (Mt 13, 9).

Mysticism proves to be the heart of the religious experience; thus, it must become the privileged place of interreligious dialogue, from which also a true intercultural dialogue should come. An interreligious dialogue that does not reach the communication at the level of spiritual experience must be considered still incomplete, cut short. The mystical experience tends to go beyond the exterior understanding of the law, even the revealed one, and its rational theological formulations. It tends to meet the Absolute Reality 'face to face'. At such a level, all the cultural and religious tribalisms that are threatening the unity and the peaceful coexistence of the human village should be radically overcome.

But before meeting in dialogue, one must have a good knowledge of the other. For me, this has meant a long journey and tireless work to reach an adequate level of knowledge of Islamic mysticism, or Sufism. I have extensively written on this topic, but here I only intend to present very briefly three stages in which, according to what Sufis say of themselves, the mystical experience in Islam is structured¹⁴.

i) The law (*shari'a*). Firstly, the Sufi experience always starts from the revealed law, the *shari'a*, the law revealed by God that cannot nor should not be manipulated by humans. This is the obligatory starting point of all Sufi paths: nobody can think to become a Sufi if he does not observe the Divine law (*shari'a*) revealed by God. This is what the tradition of the great Sufi masters has always affirmed, against the tendency, very common in our time, of the 'do it yourself', that is, 'make yourself your own religious cocktail'.

ii) The path (*tariqa*). Nonetheless, the religious law is, for Sufis, only the exterior frame of their experience. The believer is called to much more, that is, to achieve the interior and deep realities intended by God through the law, that means 'to put on the Divine qualities', as a well-known hadith states. This should actually be the ultimate goal of every believer. Such a purpose is achieved by Sufis through a spiritual journey, called 'path' (*tariqa*), that must usually be carried out under the guidance of an expert spiritual master (*sheikh*).

iii) The absolute Truth-Reality (*haqiqa*). The final stage of the Sufi path cannot possibly be a state of mere human perfection, no matter how spiritual. This would amount, as the most credited Sufi masters always stated, to a sort of idolatry (*shirk*), the gravest sin in Islam. The ultimate goal of the Sufi path can be nothing else but God Himself, the supreme Truth-Reality (*haqq - haqiqa*), as the Sufis like to call Him: He who is the ultimate goal and purpose of all religious symbols

and paths. Thus, on the ground of such an interior call, the Sufi feels to be summoned to go from the exteriority of religious laws to a personal and living interior experience of religious realities (*haqaiq*), that is, to a personal taste (*dhawq*) of the Divine Reality, which is the ultimate meaning and scope of his journey. History, however, has shown that such a journey is not always an idyllic one. In many instances, it has led Sufis to experiences and expressions perceived to contradict the first stage of the path, that of the law and its rational-theological formulations. Such a conflict in which the 'white rose' of Sufis' mystical experience has been purpled with the red of their blood, a common image-symbol of their experience, seems to be an unavoidable fact of the meeting of two freedoms: the freedom of the human being and that of God, the Absolute. God's freedom in particular has always surprised and even scandalized people who were attached to the mere exteriority of the law, its symbols and formulations.

On the basis of such premises I intend to present now the fields in which it is possible and, I would say, necessary that the various mystical experiences meet, particularly the Christian and Islamic. I call these fields 'areas' or 'spaces' of encounter, because they indicate fundamental issues that are common to all mystical experiences and to which we are called to answer. Reading one's own mystical experience in dialogue and exchange with other similar experiences is not only useful, but necessary and indispensable in our time. Encouraging efforts in this sense can be found in a number of people who have tried and continue trying the journey of interreligious dialogue at the spiritual level. Among them I like to mention here the Muslim Sufi and scholar Sayyed Hossein Nasr, the Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths, and the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn, in addition to many others¹⁵.

3 - AREAS OF ENCOUNTER AND DIALOGUE BETWEEN SUFISM AND OTHER MYSTICISMS

A - THE HUMAN BEING AND HIS IDENTITY

Every mystical experience in Christianity, and in Islam as well as in other religions, appears to be, at first, an experience of the human 'Self', the truest and deepest depths of the human being. Mystics have always been great explorers of human interiority. They are the first to affirm that the human being does not merely consist of his physio-bio-psychological components. The human being has depths from which his true identity comes forth, and such depths are usually indicated by the term 'soul' (*psychè, nafs*).

In probing the depths of the human soul mystics witness that this is mysteriously, but truly, linked with its first source, the Absolute. The human being is essentially the being of transcendence into the Absolute. This is the unlimited,

non-comprehensible and non-graspable, but ever-present Horizon of all human activity as such, especially in his fundamental acts of knowledge, love and freedom. The human being perceives (more or less consciously) such an absolute and unlimited Horizon as the transcendent and holy Mystery towards which his journey is directed.

The human being has been rightly defined as the 'pilgrim of the Absolute'. This is his ontological and existential structure, manifest in the whole phenomenology of his behaviour. He is that being that nothing can satisfy. He carries inside himself a question of meaning that never is exhausted and always imposes itself upon him. The human being is that being who is destined to transcend himself. His point of reference is a distant Horizon, beyond all that is near and surrounds him. Though distant, that Horizon is the all-encompassing reality, present in all. The human being feels himself tossed between two abysses: either the infinite elevation or the infinite fall.

Though existing in the limits of time and space, he is continuously yearning for something that transcends them. Like an imprisoned chrysalis, he tends to be transmuted into a new, free being. Like a fragile and incomplete foetus, he feels destined to be regenerated into an adult and perfect being. In all senses, the human being is that being moved by a deep desire, an insatiable thirst, and a radical restlessness that nothing can satisfy. This happens because in his depths he is aware (even if not always in an explicit way) that he is oriented towards something that has no limits, the Absolute. It does not matter whether such a desire comes explicitly to the surface of his awareness or remains implicit in his acts of knowing, loving, and deciding in freedom and responsibility. Such a desire of the Absolute always lies at the heart of his experience. These are the accents, the desires and the elevations found in the mystics of all the times. This is what they mean when they talk of the human person, of his interiority, as 'soul or spirit' (*pneuma, ruh*).

Thus, the human being is called by the interior dynamics moving him to go from the finite to the infinite, from the exterior to the interior, from the multiple to the One. The loss of such a spiritual dimension, which is true and authentic mysticism, is the precise cause of the deep crisis of modern man. Modern man, in fact, in spite of his tremendous scientific and technical progress, seems to have lost the meaning of his existence, of his true identity. He finds himself in a state of disintegration, of falling in an empty and evermore mechanised, robotised exteriorism. The saying, often repeated here, becomes ever truer for modern man: "The human being has created the machine and has turned himself into its own image and likeness"; in fact, he has even put himself to its service.

Spiritual search, on the contrary, fulfils the human being in his depths, making him ever more human, making him pass from the status of 'hominid' (as a mere

animal species) to that of 'human', i.e., as a being conscious and responsible for his destiny. It is worthwhile to notice that in Indo-European languages, human being is designated by words coming from the stem **men/man* (in German *mann*, in English *man*, in Sanskrit *mānu*), which seems related to the stem 'mind' (in Latin *mens*, in Greek *mnēmē*, in German *mind*, in Sanskrit *mānas*). This stem denotes mind and consciousness as the first characteristics of humans. In fact, among all animals, the human being appears to be that being that 'thinks', knows, is aware and conscious of his existence and destiny.

66 Helping the human being to recover his dimension as 'being-for-transcendence', as *homo viator*, one who always is on a journey, oriented and opened to the encounter with the Absolute, remains one of the fundamental duties of all religions in general, and of their mystical paths in particular. On this point, one can find an overwhelming agreement among the mystics of all religions. And this should become a vast and important field of dialogue among them, of course allowing each mystical journey to follow its specific ways traced by its particular religious tradition.

The Muslim mystics, the Sufis, have also left a lot of very interesting reflections about the real 'vocation' of the human being, as the being essentially oriented to God. At the centre of their reflection stands a well known hadith (a saying attributed to Muhammed, the prophet of Islam) that says: "Whoever knows himself (*nafs*, lit. 'his soul') knows his Lord"¹⁶. The Sufis in fact have always experienced that in the depths of the human soul there is a radical reference, an ontological openness, so to say, towards its Lord, the Absolute. This hadith has been the starting point and the centre of very rich Sufis' meditation on the human soul and its interior states. Their reflections can be summarized in two main lines.

A - THE SUFI JOURNEY AND ITS STAGES

Sufis have always been attentive scrutinizers of human spiritual travel, developing a sharp and detailed analysis of his interior states quite early. The human being is not born perfect, but has to travel towards his perfection through a number of steps and stages. The idea of the spiritual journey (*suluk*), its stages (*manazil*, *maqamat*) and states (*ahwal*), has occupied a great deal of Sufi reflection. This was also the starting point of the idea of the 'mystical way' (*tariqa*) in Islam, a way that in time has also been organized in the exterior to that purpose in the Sufi orders (*uruq*). There is quite a large amount literature on the topic, parallel to what can be found in other mystic traditions. In Christianity, for instance, one finds an ample literature on the 'ladders to Paradise' (such as the treatise of St John Climacus). Likewise, the partition of spiritual life in three

stages, the 'purgative, illuminative and unitive' has been largely developed in Christian literature. All this has its parallels in Sufi treatises.

However, one must always stress that the ultimate purpose of the spiritual journey is not to reach some interior states (sought after, many times in an obsessive way, in many 'deviant' mysticisms). The ultimate purpose of the mystical journey is and must remain the encounter, the union with the Absolute, God, who always remains the ultimate purpose of all human journey. The great mystic masters of all religious traditions have always warned their disciples against the danger of falling into the trap of making the interior spiritual states the ultimate goal of their mystical path.

67 Here, there is the danger of falling into what Sufis have always denounced as 'hidden associationism' (*al-shirk al-khafi*), amounting to idolatry (*shirk*), in which something is put at the same level as God, in this instance, some spiritual states. This is one of the gravest dangers for the Sufi path.

B - THE DIMENSIONS OF THE HUMAN BEING

The mystical path, leading the human being to God, leads him, at the same time, to discover and fulfil his fundamental ontological dimensions. In the Islamic vision, the human being is qualified by three fundamental categories which encompass his essential dimensions: he is servant (*abd*), vicar or vice-regent (*khalifa*), and image (*sura*) of God¹⁷.

The human being is first of all the 'servant of God' (*abd Allah*). He is totally related to God, in an absolute ontological dependence on Him. The qualification 'servant' (*abd*) is not humiliating to the human being, as a superficial reading might believe. Such a title, on the contrary, is the true source and reason for his nobility. In fulfilling, in a total and conscious way, such an absolute dependence on God, the human-servant (*abd*) encounters a most generous (*karim*) Lord, who honours him and makes him share his lordship over his creatures. Because of this, the human being is given the title of 'vicar' or 'vice-regent' (*khalifa*) of God over creation. All this, however, has its basis on a fundamental ontological reality: the human being is created in the 'image' of God (*sura*), as an accepted hadith states¹⁸. For this reason, the human being can and must reproduce in himself the 'traits' or the 'qualities' of God: 'Put on the traits (*akhlaq*) of God', says another important hadith, a basic reference for the Sufi path¹⁹.

All these speculations have resulted, in many Sufi trends and in that of Ibn 'Arabi in particular, in the elaboration of the idea of the 'Perfect Human Being' (*al-insan al-kamil*). In such an understanding, the human being is seen as the microcosm, the mirror of the Divine qualities, the synthesis of the manifestations

of the Real-Absolute (*haqq*) in the universe (*khalq*). In such a Sufi vision, a quite common one too among the Sufi orders or paths (*turuq*), the human being is called to become the perfect manifestation of the Real-Absolute (*haqq*). In this way, a deep union between the Real-Creator and the creature (*haqq-khalq*), between the Lord and the servant (*Rabb-'abd*), is achieved to the point that the servant, having put on the qualities of his Lord, becomes the servant-Lord (*'abd rabbani*), according to a famous expression of Ibn 'Arabi.

Such speculations on the perfection of the human being call to mind similar ideas in Christian mysticism. Also in the Christian vision, the human being is seen as the servant-image of God, charged with the care of his creation. Moreover, the idea of the *Al-insan al-kamil* may be put in parallel with the Christian idea of the 'divinisation' (*theopoiësis-theiôsis*) of the human being, keeping, surely, all the differences coming from the different visions of faith. In the Christian vision the question is not simply about having a share in the Divine qualities, but of having a share in the Divine life itself, in its inner and eternal source, which is the Trinitarian communion. In any case, a deep exchange of views and experiences in this respect would surely represent an illuminating event for the two mystical traditions, the Christian and the Islamic, and at large also for others.

From the above, one can see how Sufis and Christian mystics can have in their vision of the human being a vast space for encounter, mutual comprehension and enrichment. In such a space, a deep dialogue between the two spiritual traditions is not only possible, but highly desirable and, beyond doubt, profitable for all²⁰.

Such topics, however, should also become spaces for concrete ways of collaboration among the different spiritual traditions to save modern man from the danger of a total spiritual disintegration, from falling into the emptiness of values, that is leading him, in the present global consumerism, to a total, 'dehumanised' robotisation. It follows that all true mysticism in all religions is now charged with a fundamental duty and a grave responsibility toward the whole of humankind: it has to cooperate in saving the 'human', in its truest and most profound meaning, in every human being, leading him to the encounter with his first Origin and his last Goal, the Absolute Himself.

3-2 ~ THE HUMAN BEING AND HIS ENVIRONMENT: THE UNIVERSE.

The human being is placed in a universe extending and expanding into dimensions still unknown, to a great extent. Nonetheless, it is in such a universe and through it that the human being is called to his self-fulfilment in his journey towards the Absolute. This point can and should also become a vast and rich field of exchange and dialogue between all mystical traditions, the Christian

and the Islamic in particular. Both affirm that the universe cannot and should not be reduced to 'pure material' to be manipulated according to the whimsical pleasure of humans. The deepest and truest meaning of the universe is to be the room or space where humans make their journey towards the Absolute. In this respect, one has to mention two important issues concerning the universe, as human environment.

A ~ MODERN SCIENCE AND THE LOSS OF THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF THE UNIVERSE

A contemporary Sufi master and well-known scholar, Sayyed Hossein Nasr, explains that the universe has two fundamental dimensions or aspects in the Sufi vision: a changeable and a permanent. In his view, to have forgotten the permanent aspect of it in order to concentrate only on the aspect of mutability and experimentability is the basic mistake of modern science. This fact has led to a secularised vision of the universe, with the loss of its sacred dimension and, consequently, also the loss of the sacred dimension of the human being situated in it. Despite the enormous progress achieved through science, modern man has lost the meaning of his existence. Having reduced the universe to a mere 'object of use and consummation', as material to be manipulated according to his own whims, the human being also ends up reducing himself to the same level of being an 'object of use and consummation', at the mercy of the consumerist technology he himself created. Consequently, there has been a global fall of values because of an almost exclusive concentration on the sole material and utilitarian aspects of nature. Such a vision has led humankind to the most unrestrained and greedy exploitation of nature and its resources ever seen in its history.

The consequences of such irresponsible behaviour make themselves felt to the point that even the secularists, i.e., the supporters of a totally secularised vision of the universe, are becoming aware that there is now an compelling need for change. What is needed now is a project for a 'more human' development, based on a more global and integral vision of the human being and his environment. Yet the secularists have lost the key to a 'spiritual' reading of reality in denying any relationship with transcendence. For this reason, it is necessary now to return to what Sayyed Hossein Nasr calls the 'qualitative science' of the great religious traditions of the past. These have since time immemorial read the universe as the relative, mutable being, necessarily related to the permanent Absolute, that holds it in existence. The deep meaning of the relative and contingent is to be a manifestation of the Absolute and Necessary. Isolated in itself, the relative loses its true meaning and its radical orientation, falling into nonsense, in an ontological vacuum that necessarily leads to an ethical-moral void, with all its catastrophic consequences.

This is the 'deadly disease' of modern times, long since denounced by the most acute analysts of the existential situation of modern man.

B ~ FOR A HARMONY BETWEEN SCIENCE AND SPIRITUAL WISDOM

70 Only by retrieving the 'spiritual' meaning of the universe will modern science escape the danger of becoming a factor of destruction, and not of development and growth for the universe and for humankind in it. The human being must now regain the symbolic profound meaning of nature, as manifestation of the Absolute. In ancient cosmology, such an operation was undoubtedly much easier. The universe was imagined to be composed of a number of levels of beings extending from earth to heavens. The whole was spontaneously oriented toward their supreme Lord "Who is seated on his Throne that towers above and encompasses all" (C. 2,255). In such a vision, the exterior cosmos (the universe) could find easy parallels with the interior one (the human soul). The human being in fact was conceived to be the microcosm, that is, the mirror and image of the macrocosm, the universe. A deep, innate correspondence was found between the two. In such a vision, a 'spiritual' reading of the universe was much easier for ancient humans than for us in modern times.

In fact, after all the progress made by modern science, such a 'spiritual' reading of the universe has been disbanded, becoming almost impossible. The modern vision of the universe has shattered the harmony and the symbolic meanings that existed in ancient thought. We find it difficult to integrate our traditional spirituality with the vision of a universe now, growing in a unlimited process of expansion and evolution set off by the initial Big-bang, and moving onward almost by 'chance' under the pressure of some formidable physical forces. Only now do we tentatively begin to get some notion of these forces (four as far as we know now) that seem to operate without any fixed purpose, but according to a quite common opinion, without any purpose at all. Chance seems for many the supreme law of the universe.

Up above there, one no longer sees heavens inhabited by angelic forms, sending their beneficial or malefic influences to our planet. Now one sees only confused masses of galaxies there, in an extremely quick expansion since from far distant time, agitated by some basic physical forces and directed to where nobody knows. Hence a pressing question: what meaning can all this have for our spiritual life? Is it possible to continue to live in such a dichotomy between a scientific and a mystical vision of the universe? Is it enough to repeat in our spiritual books the cosmological patterns of old, when now we live in the vision of a completely different reality?

Such questions require answers and this still remains, to a great extent, a formidable challenge for contemporary mysticism and spiritualities. The mythological solutions continue to be an easy temptation, since they offer simpler solutions of more immediate satisfaction. Yet in the long run, they will not stand a close confrontation with the data of science.

71 On the Christian side, there have been some attempts at finding a solution to such questioning, the best known being that of the Jesuit scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin²¹. This scientist-theologian tried to find a theoretical and existential integration between modern science and Christian faith. He developed what he called 'mysticism of the earth', because it starts from the data given by modern science about the universe, trying to integrate them in the Christian vision of faith. Here Christ is seen as the Omega point; that is, the final point, towards which the whole cosmic evolution is climbing. Teilhard de Chardin has become an inspiring example for many people that look for a harmony and a complementarity between science and faith. Nonetheless, his cannot be taken as the final answer to the 'cosmological' question of modern spirituality confronting modern science. The quest in this direction has to continue. Also on the Islamic side, it seems to me, a parallel reflection could be developed, retrieving some cosmological intuitions of Sufis such as Ibn 'Arabi, Jalal al-Din Rumi and others.

In conclusion, in the field of the relationship between the human being and his environment, the universe, broad space can be found for encounter and exchange, for dialogue between different mystical experiences, the Christian and the Islamic in particular. A common commitment here is not only possible but also highly desirable for integration between modern science and the religious, mystical experience. Such a work has become all the more necessary to modern man so that he may recover the true meaning of his existence and that of the universe around him. Here, interreligious dialogue should also lead to a common commitment to save the human being and his environment from the devastation brought about by modern technological consumerism.

3-3 ~ THE HUMAN BEING AND ITS ULTIMATE GROUND: GOD.

Finally, the human being finds his deepest and truest identity when he relates himself to his first Origin and ultimate Goal, the Absolute. Here the dialogue between the various religious traditions reaches its apex. Precisely by taking a stand in front of the Absolute every religion reveals its most specific originality, but also, in many instances, surprising coincidences it shares with others. Every religion, in fact, is in the end inspired by the same first Origin and oriented towards the same ultimate Goal: God.

The Absolute, ultimate aspiration of the human heart, cannot possibly be a product of the human being himself. That would amount to an idol and would be a deep and radical deceit about the very nature of human identity. It has been stated above that the Absolute, the final goal of the human pilgrimage, turns out to be ultimately, at the same time, what is most indispensable and necessary to him, but also what is most independent from him, that can be received only as a free gift and grace, far from any human reach or manipulation. The Absolute always remains sovereignty free to dispose of Himself: He communicates Himself in the way He wants, without any previous condition imposed upon Him by anybody. This is the very heart of all mystical experience, a point on which one can find interesting consonances between the various mystical traditions, the Abrahamic in particular. This idea is well illustrated in the apologue written by the Persian Sufi, Fariduddin 'Attar in his book *The Speech of the Birds*. He narrates that when the thirty birds (a symbol of the Sufis in quest of God) arrive at the gates of the palace of Simûrgh, the mysterious bird of China (symbol of the Divine Being, the ultimate goal of the bird's quest), and they ask to meet Him, they hear the answer that if they need Him, He does not need them: God always remains the Self-sufficient, totally independent (*ghani*) from his creatures and their requests.

Here, a very fundamental question arises that must concern all religious traditions. Must the Absolute necessarily remain only a far remote horizon, an asymptotic goal, towards which the human being projects his existence without receiving any sort of answer? Must the Absolute necessarily remain, as it were, prisoner of his own transcendence? Can He not make Himself present in human history and reveal Himself explicitly to the human pilgrim? Who can dare put previous conditions to the being and acting of the Absolute? The journey towards Him, if an authentic quest of Him, cannot be done but in a humble waiting of his possible advent into human history, if this is His will. The Absolute is always free to dispose of Himself, without any condition. In fact, the unconditioned openness and waiting on the part of the human being can be considered the only prerequisite the Absolute himself has put in the human heart for Him to reveal Himself and give Himself to him, in the way He chooses. This is well expressed in the famous words of St Augustin: "You have made us for You, [o Lord], and our heart is always restless till it finds its rest in You" (*Confessions* 1, 1).

In fact, the universal experience of all mystics in all religious traditions witnesses that a total emptying of the human self in front of the Absolute is required if the human being wants to be filled by Him alone. The Sufis, have talked at lengths of the *fana'* (annihilation, emptying of one's self) to pass into *baqa'* (the subsistence in God). Such terms bring to mind the 'all and nothing' (God is all

and the human self is nothing) of a great part of the Christian mystical tradition, in particular the *todo y nada* (all and nothing) of Spanish Christian mysticism.

But when the Absolute breaks into the human history, this necessarily assumes new meaning and new dimensions. Created beings now become signs charged with new dimensions and horizons transcending their created limits, as they are now elevated to be signs-symbols of the Absolute. Mystics are the people who have experienced and expressed in a most real and dramatic way such an inexhausted and dramatic tension between the categorial, limited and the transcendent, unlimited reality.

Whatever religious tradition he belongs to, a true mystic must be one who has lived in the most radical way such an encounter with the Absolute and, like Moses on Mount Sinai, has been totally transfigured by it. From such a personal experience, a particular sensibility has developed in him towards any other experience of the Absolute. This is, perhaps, the profound reason why mystics of all the various religious traditions have such a strange syntony of feelings and such a striking affinity of expressions. They have come near to the same source and drawn from the same well that contains water, in itself, all the most various tastes.

Thus, mystics experience the Absolute at the same time as Transcendent and Immanent, as One and Multiple, in His perfect simplicity and inexhaustible variety. None of these aspects can be isolated or negated, because the Absolute as such cannot be but the *coincidentia oppositorum*, i. e., the synthesis of the opposites. Or better, He is the transcendence of the opposites, beyond their limited and limiting distinctions fixed by the capacity of human reason (*aql*), as mystics of all religious traditions do not grow weary repeating.

The mystic, in contrast to the theologian, has no fear of diving into the apories and the paradoxes of the Absolute, going beyond all rational categories, because he is guided by a deeper perception of reality. The Absolute always makes Himself known as the Mystery that is understood as far as He cannot be understood, because "[...] if you understand Him, He is not God" (St Augustin). A well-known saying attributed to Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, a companion of the Prophet of Islam and his first successor (*caliph*), goes along the same lines: "Praise to Him who has given to his creatures no other way to know Him but their incapacity of knowing Him"²². Incomprehensibility of God has always been a fundamental truth at the heart of any Sufi, and mystical experience; therefore, it can and should become a field of rich exchange and deep dialogue among the various mystical traditions.

In Islamic thought, for instance, the question of proclaiming God's unity (*tawhid*) together with the reality of his many attributes has for long time been the object of theologians' disputes, without reaching any clear solution, except for the silence imposed by the 'do not ask how' (*bila kayfa*).

It seems to me that only in Sufis such a questioning has received a more adequate approach, because these did not fear diving into the 'paradoxes of the One'. For the Andalusian Sufi, Ibn 'Arabi, for instance, the apex of the proclamation of God's unity (*tawhid*) does not consist in the simple affirmation of an abstract Divine unity, as it is usually understood by the majority of believers, and even by rational theologians. For Ibn 'Arabi the true *tawhid* consists in the striking and paradoxical affirmation of the Divine unity together with the infinite multiplicity of his self-manifestations (*tajalliyyat*). These self-manifestations are real aspects of the Real-Absolute (*haqq*), who always and at the same time reveals Himself as One and multiple, Creator and creature, according to the point of view from which He is considered. Besides, the Real-Absolute (*haqq*) should not be thought of as being in a state of fixed immobility, but in an inexhaustible dynamic movement of being, driven by a mysterious, originary, transcendent and creative force: Love (*hubb*). The basic impulse out of which the Divine Essence (the 'hidden treasure' mentioned in a hadith, a very important one in Sufi reflection) has manifested itself in the infinite series of self-manifestations (*tajalliyyat*) comes from Love (*hubb*), flowing out of the unfathomable depths of the Divine Essence²³.

In a celebrated passage of his *Bezels of Wisdom* Ibn 'Arabi proclaims:

"The movement which is the existence (*wujūd*) of the world, was a movement of love... Were it not for this love, the world would not have appeared in its essence; thus, its movement from nothing (*'adam*) to existence (*wujūd*) was a movement of the love of the Creator (*mūjid*) towards it (*wujūd*). So, it is proved that the movement was out of love and there is no movement in the universe except in relation to love (*hubbiyyan*) [...]"²⁴.

On the basis of such a vision, many Sufis have developed daring speculations on the Divine being, fruits of their particular interior experiences. Some of them have talked about an essential mercy (*rahma dhatiyya*) in God, others of an original love (*mahabba asliyya*) in Him. In their vision, these were the driving motives of God's creative act. Creation is nothing else but the self-manifestation of God from Himself to Himself and in Himself. The multiplicity of creation does not happen outside God, but in the Divine being itself, springing forth from its inexhaustible creative capacity of love.

These are just some quick hints, but enough to show that on this topic there is ample space for common reflections and exchanges that could show interesting and un-thought-of parallelisms among the various mystical experiences, those of the Abrahamic tradition in particular.

It is at this point, in my view, that one could also find a way of mutual understanding on an issue that for centuries has divided and opposed Christians and Muslims with reciprocal anathemas and condemnations, not only theoretical. I mean the traditional clash between the strict Islamic monotheism and the Christian Trinity. In past theological controversies these dogmas have been mostly looked at as exclusive of and denying each other, without alternative. My purpose here is not that of eliminating the differences existing between the two religious beliefs in a compromise that would result in a betrayal of both faiths. My intention is to point to some issues that are similar in both religious traditions and could help create a reciprocal understanding, overcoming a lot of atavic prejudices, accepted most of the time as self-evident.

The basic question that both religious traditions have to face can be expressed in the following terms. Must God, the ultimate Mystery towards which the human being is oriented, necessarily be closed in his transcendence, as if imprisoned in a limit insurmountable even to Himself? Or, is He free and powerful enough to give to his creatures not only some gifts and qualities (a fact that the Islamic tradition as well as other mystical traditions admit without difficulty) but of communicating 'Him-self', or say, 'His very Self' to his creatures, going beyond any presumed limit fixed by His transcendence? Christian faith has given a positive answer to this question on the basis of the revelation coming from God himself as absolute and unconditioned love, "God is love" (1 Gv 4, 8.16). In such a vision, the reality of 'being-God' does not primarily mean his isolation in a transcendent and absolute unity, unapproachable by his creatures. 'Being-God' means, foremost his transcendent power of communicating Him-self, precisely 'His very Self', outside Himself, in a free but also total Self-communication.

Christian faith sees that creation is actually one of the first steps of God's Self-communication, called 'exterior' to God. However, such an exterior Self-communication has its root and its source in the interior Self-communication of God of Himself to Himself. God is in fact *par essence* Communion, because in Himself He is the eternal Love, the eternal Lover and the eternal Beloved. This is the essence of the Trinitarian mystery. And it is precisely because He is Love that He creates, and He is and remains free and powerful to communicate, not only 'some things or qualities', but Him-self, His very Self, outside Himself, to his creatures. But these always remain free to accept or not to accept such a Divine Self-communication. In the Christian vision, this is the first and ultimate root of the 'divinisation' (*theopoiësis-theiôsis*) of the human being, a thought expressed by the Fathers of the Church in the well-known theologoumenon: "God has become human being so

that the human being might become God”, not by right, but by grace because God freely communicates to him his Divine life.

We have seen above how such a topic finds interesting parallels in daring speculations of many Sufis on the idea of the *Al-insan al-kamil*. Obviously, there is no room here for entering into further consideration on this topic.

In any case, it should be clear by now, to avoid any distorted if not wrong affirmation, that the question of the unity and the multiplicity of God lies well beyond the simplistic mathematical aporia of the one and the three, as it has been repeated innumerable times in past traditional controversies. God is one and multiple at the same time. Such paradoxical aspect of the Divine unity has been in some way perceived by the deepest and most daring intuitions of many Sufis who have gone far beyond the abstract rational-theological categories of theologians. Many Sufis have perceived that the abyss of the Divine being is moved by the unfathomable mystery of an ‘essential Mercy and original Love’. These are the forces that have driven the ‘hidden treasure’, i.e., the Divine Essence, out of itself expanding itself in an infinite series of self-manifestations, flowing from it and going back to it.

It is also interesting to note that similar reflections are also found in many other religious traditions, far from the Abrahamic, as in the idea of the Amida Buddha in Buddhist tradition. The Japanese scholar, Takeuchi Yoshinori, opposing the traditional idea centred on only the Divine transcendence, talks of the ‘trans-descendence’ of the Amida Buddha, through which He communicates Himself to his faithful and bestows on them salvation, as a completely free gift²⁵.

Here, there is also a vast space open to dialogue and exchange for a mutual comprehension between different mystical traditions fathoming the deep Mystery of God. All mystical traditions are ways aiming to guide every human being to meet, even to dive into the abyss of the Divine Mystery, a Mystery always full of surprises and novelties, a Mystery always exceeding and transcending whatever the human mind might think and the human heart might hope. Yet such a Mystery has been experienced and perceived by many mystics as a Mystery of absolute love, a Mystery not only transcendent but also trans-descendent, because He wanted to be known by his creatures and to communicate Himself to them in the most inconceivable way, giving his very Self to them.

Leading the human being to the ‘face to face’ encounter with such a Mystery means helping him achieve his deepest vocation and identity. This is the fundamental task of all religious traditions, and of their mystical ways in particular. And this is also a most important and vast field open to encounter, dialogue and cooperation.

After these brief considerations of possible fields of dialogue between Christian mysticism and Sufism, it is important now to underline the urgency of such a dialogue, not only between Christian and Islamic traditions, but also at large with all the spiritual traditions of all religions, without precondition or limit.

Leaving aside the discussion about patterns or theologies of dialogue, in our present global situation it appears to be more important now that the different spiritual traditions enter into an actual dialogue among themselves. In such a dialogue each of them can and must keep its own identity and originality, together with a convinced and proved attitude of openness, acceptance and comprehension of the others. In a word, each of them must mature from within itself an open attitude to the ‘otherness of the other’. The purpose of the present reflection was to just indicate some fields or spaces in which such a dialogical encounter can and should take place. Now, all spiritual traditions, here specifically the Christian and the Islamic, are urgently called on to answer the problems of the human being of our time, which could be described as the human being of globalisation and religious pluralism.

From many sides, unrelenting calls are rising for a return to the ‘*sapientia perennis*’, the perennial wisdom or the basic human wisdom, common to many religious traditions, that in the past has been the source of development for humankind. This old, but always new, wisdom is now called to provide a meaning to our contemporary history, a history in which the human being is at risk of losing his own ‘human’ identity and being swallowed in a global and total ‘robotisation’.

To that purpose quite a number of spiritual figures of our time have dedicated their best efforts to make the religious traditions of the East and the West meet together in order to establish once again and now on more profound spiritual basis the real ‘human’ identity of human being. We have already mentioned some of them, such as the Muslim scholar and mystic Sayyed Hossein Nasr, the Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths and the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. But there are many others in the field, working with the same purpose. These people are convinced that only in recovering the spiritual riches of all religious traditions can there be hope to save the modern man from his downfall. Such a work should be implemented now in a sincere atmosphere of dialogue and collaboration, in a sort of interreligious spiritual ecumenism, leaving aside interreligious bickering, so common in the past. And this interreligious spiritual ecumenism should lead to a joint praxis on behalf of the human being at all levels in the end, beyond all cultural and religious boundaries. Only through such spiritual cooperation from all sides can one hope for a better future for humankind. Spiritual persons, as the ones

mentioned, are in our present time highly necessary to make the modern man of technological consumerism recover his true human dimensions, inspired by the great cultural and religious traditions of the past.

Thus, the human being of our present technological era is now, at the beginning of the third millennium, urgently called upon to correct and re-orientate the course of his rational-scientific and technological-consumeristic enterprise. He has to achieve a new and deep synthesis between science and technology on one side, and spiritual wisdom on the other. Such a task must begin without delay if one hopes to save humankind from the danger of being disintegrated into individualistic ethical atomism and fragmentation, driving towards spiritual self-destruction. And this may just be the premise for a total assured physical self-destruction.

This is the call of the wise and the prophets of our time and one still hopes that their voices will not fall in vain in the deserts of our technological metropolis.

In addition to this, the spiritual religious traditions are called upon to save humankind from another mortal danger that is spreading in our global village. This is the danger embodied in the revival of what we have called 'the new religious tribalism', in which religion is captured and put at the service of particular political and economic interests. This phenomenon concerns, in particular, some areas of Islamic world that are under the sway of what is now usually called the 'political Islam'. Such a mixture of religion and tribal spirit, supported by a great deal of economic and political interests, is the source of many extremist movements that have brought, and continue to bring, about wars and devastations. However, the same phenomenon is being noticed in many other religious traditions also. I think that Sufism, in particular is called to be a credible alternative to the so-called political Islam. Sufism, together with other spiritual traditions, is called upon to become a true agent of peace and fraternity in the present global village, upholding and fostering the true spiritual dimensions of Islam based on deep values such as justice, mercy and love.

These spiritual values are a common legacy of the religious tradition of the Abrahamic families. All three of them affirm that the human being has been created in the image of God and that this is true for all human beings beyond any cultural and religious boundary. Consequently, every single human being must be respected in his fundamental values, especially in his freedom of conscience, speech and community. This principle could represent, in my view, a common and solid ground, wide enough on which the efforts of the spiritual traditions of the Abrahamic family can be united in defence of the human person, rejecting any attack to its dignity. Such an interreligious dialogue, however, should be extended

to all the other spiritual traditions of humankind, in a sort of interreligious ecumenism, fostering a deeper intercultural dialogue among humans at all levels. Only on such a basis, can a peaceful coexistence among the peoples of our global village become real.

Thus, the spiritual tradition of Islam, or Sufism, is called upon to become an ever more active agent of peace and fraternity in our time and may help Islam to face the four challenges mentioned above. First, it must revisit its original message freeing it from a stifling legalism. Then, it needs to take a positive stand towards modernity, particularly with regard to the question of human rights and modern science. Third, it should enter into constructive dialogue with the other religious traditions in a mature attitude of openness to the spiritual values of the others. Finally, it has to commit itself, together with the other spiritual forces, to justice on behalf of all and every each single human being of our present humankind.

This is quite an urgent challenge for our contemporary world.
And all religions are now urgently called upon to be no longer instruments of a devastating power (*instrumentum imperii*), as they have been too many times in the past and nonetheless may become again. All religions, and their spiritual traditions in particular, are now called upon to become factors of fraternity, conviviality and peace among all peoples and cultures of the present global human village. True interreligious dialogues for the true good of humankind should aim to achieve this.



NOTES

¹ These reflections are based on the paper presented at the Conference held by the Gregorian University (Rome) the 25-28th September 2005, in occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council document *Nostra Aetate*.

² See the *Nostra Aetate* document in the collection of the official documents of the Catholic Church on interreligious dialogue edited by Francesco Gioia: *Il dialogo interreligioso nel magistero pontificio (Documenti 1963-1993)* (Vatican City: Libreria Città del Vaticano, 1994); English trans., *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997: 37-43); French trans., *Le dialogue interreligieux dans l'enseignement de l'Eglise Catholique (1963-1997)* (Paris: Éditions de Solesmes, 1998).

³ *Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 623.

⁴ Human being as the 'being of the metaphysical question', that is the question on the meaning of Being in general as well as of his personal existence, has been the object

of an extensive modern philosophical and theological reflection. Here, I basically refer to the vision of Karl Rahner (d. 1984), one of the greatest Catholic theologians of the XXth century and also one of the main contributors to the Second Vatican Council. He managed to assume the questions of modern thinking in a positive theological approach; see Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, (German or. *Geist in Welt*, ed. by Johannes Baptist Metz, Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1957), Engl. trans. by William Dych (London: Sheed and Ward, 1998 (1st Engl. ed. 1968), in particular pp. 57-65; id., *Hearers of the Word*, (German or. *Hörer des Wortes*, ed. by Johannes Baptist Metz, Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1963), Engl. trans. by Ronald Walls (London: Sheed and Ward, 1969).

⁵ On the topic of globalization there is a wealth of literature; much of which is found in the website www.globalization. Here I mention only some basic titles to which my reflections were inspired and may be a useful introduction to the topic of globalization: K. Bales, *Disposable People. New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Z. Bauman, *Globalization. The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), (tr. it., *Dentro la globalizzazione. Le conseguenze sulle persone* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2001); id., *Wasted Lives. Modernity and its Outcasts* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003/Oxford: Polity Press, 2004); N. Boyle, *Who are we now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); M. Chossudovsky, *Globalizzazione della povertà e Nuovo ordine mondiale*, (Turin: EGA Editore 2003) (French or. 1997); A. Giddens, *Runaway World. How Globalization is Shaping Our Lives* (London-New York: Routledge, 1999); M. Hardt-A. Negri, *Empire* (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2000) (tr. it. *Impero* (Milan: BUR, 2003); D. Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell 2000); id., *The New Imperialism* (Oxford-New York: Oxford UP, 2003); G. Lynch, *After Religion. 'Generation X' and the Search for Meaning* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002); J. Rieger, *God and the Excluded. Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis (MN): Fortress Press, 2001); M. C. Taylor, *Hiding* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); G. Ward, *True Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell 2003).

⁶ On these topics see Peter H. Van Ness, (ed.), *Spirituality and the Secular Quest* (London: World Spirituality, SCM, 1996).

⁷ The phenomenology of religion in post-modern societies has been widely analyzed under all different aspects, especially in its individualistic fragmentation and atomization at all levels. Here I refer in particular to the researches of CESNUR (Center for the Study of New Religions, Turin), directed by Massimo Introvigne; see in particular Massimo Introvigne, *New Age & Next Age* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 2000); and Pier Luigi Zoccatelli, *Il New Age* (Leumann, Turin: Elledici, 3rd ed., 1999); and Andrea Menegotto (ed.), *New Age: «fine» o rinnovamento? Le origini, gli sviluppi, le idee, la crisi, la «fine» del New Age e la nascita di un nuovo fenomeno: il Next Age. Una nuova sfida per la Chiesa*, (San Giuliano M.: Sinergie, 1999); also M. Introvigne - P. L. Zoccatelli - Nelly Ippolito Macrina - Veronica Roldan, *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Leumann, (Turin), Elledici, 2001), which offer a wealth of information about all religious movements present in our post-modern society.

⁸ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁹ On religious pluralism see the fundamental research of Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

¹⁰ On dialogue see David Tracy, *Dialogue with the other. The interreligious Dialogue*, (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990).

¹¹ To this purpose I refer to my study: "L'islam nel 'villaggio globale", in Giuseppe Scattolin, *L'islam nella globalizzazione* (Bologna: EMI, 2004: 63-92).

¹² For further research see my study: "Introduzione alla mistica: unità di esclusione o unità di unione" in Giuseppe Scattolin, *Spiritualità nell'islam* (Bologna: EMI, 2004: 11-30). An interesting reflection on mysticism as experience of human identity is given by Raimon Panikkar, in *L'esperienza della vita - La mistica* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2005, Spanish original, 2004).

¹³ Jean Vernet, *Il secolo XXI o sarà mistico o non sarà* (Rome: Edizioni OCD, 2005). For a phenomenology of the present religious movements, especially in Western societies, see also Massimo Introvigne - Jean-François Mayer - Ernesto Zucchini (eds.), *I nuovi movimenti religiosi* (Turin: CESNUR, LDC, 1990); Massimo Introvigne - Jean-François Mayer (eds.), *L'Europa delle nuove religioni* (Turin: CESNUR, LDC, 1993).

¹⁴ For a general introduction to Sufism see my research, "Il cammino spirituale nell'Islam: cammino sufi e riflessione cristiana", in Giuseppe Scattolin, *Spiritualità nell'islam* (Bologna: EMI, 2004: 31-56); and my *Esperienze mistiche nell'Islam* (Bologna: EMI, voll. I-III, 1994-2000).

¹⁵ See some works of these thinkers such as: Sayyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972); Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality - Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith* (London: Fount, 1992 (1989)); Thich Nhat Hanh, *La luce del Dharma. Dialogo tra cristianesimo e buddhismo* (Milan: Mondadori, 2003 (1999)).

¹⁶ This *hadith*, very much quoted in Sufi tradition, is not found in the canonical collection, see A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane* (Leiden: Brill, 1936-1969, 7 voll. 2).

¹⁷ For a fuller study of the topic see my "L'uomo nell'islam", in Giuseppe Scattolin, *Dio e uomo nell'Islam* (Bologna: EMI, 2004: 36-68).

¹⁸ This *hadith* is found in the canonical collections: Wensinck, *Concordance*, III: 438b.

¹⁹ Also this *hadith*, often quoted in the Sufi tradition, is not found in the canonical collections, Wensinck, *Concordances*; see the commentary of al-Ghazali in my *Esperienze mistiche*, III: 241-242.

²⁰ An example of such a comparative study is given in Arnaldez Roger, *Réflexions chrétiennes sur la mystique musulmane* (Paris: OeIL, 1989).

²¹ For some basic reading of his thought see Pierre Teillard de Chardin, *Le phénomène humain* (Paris: Seuil, 1955); id., *Le milieu divin* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).

²² Such saying is quoted and commented upon in the *Risâla al-Qushayriyya*, see my translation, Giuseppe Scattolin, *Esperienze mistiche nell'Islam*, II, 1996: 189.



AWRAHAM SOETENDORP

Rabbi, President European Region, World Union for Progressive Judaism, Amsterdam

²³ The *hadith* says: “I was a hidden (unknown) treasure, and I loved to be known, so I created the world and through it they (creatures) knew me”. The *hadith*, so important for Sufis and often quoted in their writings with some variations, is not found in the official collections; we translated it from *Fusus al-hikam*, Abu ‘Ala ‘Afifi (ed.) (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-‘Arabi, 1980: 203-204); also Arthur J. Arberry, *Sufism. An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1990: 28 (1st ed.1950)).

²⁴ Ibn ‘Arabi, *Fusus al-hikam*, Abu ‘Ala ‘Afifi (ed.), pp. 203-204.

²⁵ See Takeuchi Yoshinori, *Il cuore del Buddhismo*, (Italian trans.) (Bologna: EMI, 1999) in which the author explains the Buddhist vision of grace.



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PEACE, SHALOM AND SALAM,
it is a really special moment to be here today and, at the same time, to realize the relativity of time. In about two hours I have to be in the synagogue to celebrate *Simchat Torah*, the rejoicing of the Torah. Just three weeks ago, the High Holidays began with the Jewish New Year. The first day of the Jewish New Year we read from the scriptures the story of God’s concern about Hagar and Ishmael being sent away by Abraham. On that day, in all synagogues all over the world, we all were involved in interfaith, and now we are here drawn to the realization of our Muslim brothers and sisters to find a way forward together. At the end of the three weeks, we will celebrate the *Simchat Torah*. That means we leave off reading one scroll, the end of the Torah: the death of Moses in front of the promised land, where he is not allowed to go in. Then, we immediately begin with a second scroll, which we read from the beginning, “God created heaven and earth”, that is continuity, the continuity of the spirit.

Some of our Jewish members here will have to leave shortly to be able to celebrate in Amsterdam, next time we should celebrate together. I invite you to the synagogue, not this time because you have a programme to continue, but next time and, if some of you want to join in this evening, please be welcome.

All that has been said here today, the timing of our conference and the tone of mysticism just set by my brother from Cairo [Scattolin], leads me to certain realizations. In some way, all that we are attempting to do is to allow the soul to breach the walls that have been erected, to acknowledge that we need each other.

Among the challenges we face in establishing an interfaith dialogue are our motives for doing so. Do I engage in interfaith because it is a civil duty? Do I do it because it is the decent thing to do and I do not want to harm my fellow human being? Yet, all the while, I feel I am complete in my own faith, and I do not need, in a spiritual sense, the Other? Or, rather, do I engage in dialogue because I feel my faith not complete without the Other?

I say this to you as a Jew, as a Rabbi for so many years, I need you to be complete. In saying so, I echo a sentiment that is expressed in one of the prayers

of the high holidays which returns again and again: we should become one boundless human being, to do God's will and restore the earth. Existentially, I believe, we need the other.

We are here because of this very engagement and, as Mr De Jong said earlier, we have to work together to supplement the role of government responsibility. I will be frank, politicians alone will not fulfill the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, we must do it together.

We are in a critical moment in earth's history, not in human history, in earth's history. The choice is ours. Join together as humans to safeguard the earth in a global alliance, or risk destruction of the earth and all its inhabitants. When we look to the development of a human identity, provided basic needs have been met, development rests on *being*, more than *having* more. We join together in this spiritual spur to make the change of hearts possible.

At the very beginning of this encounter, Professor Ernst told us a joke about an atheist, it reminded me that I once met a very famous professor of Economics in Holland, a convinced atheist whom on a certain occasion said, "thank God I'm an atheist". In our spiritual communities we should – and we do – include humanists, agnostics and all people moved by the spirit, all together, Interfaith is no longer at the margin of society, it is in the center. I am very much aware of being here in the center, in the center of society. I am aware of the responsibilities that we religious leaders have sometimes squandered and I believe this is a new opportunity. I am very impressed by the directive and action of the Jubilo Project and I am sure that the government and everyone will understand that we have little time left.

I turn to what some of you have mentioned as one of the problems of today in Africa, the genocide in Darfur. Some of you may debate whether you may call it genocide, but that is not the point. The point is, as my Muslim friend [Akungduz] has reminded us and everyone has concluded: a human being is created in the face of God. At times the cruelty of this creation has astounded scholars, but it is only when we come together, united in humanity, that we evince our divinity. When every human being is mindful not just of him or herself, only when the cries of a child in Darfur are heeded we form together the image of God.

At this particular moment of history God challenges us, by whatever name we call Him. Certainly in our monotheistic religions, as well as in Buddhism and Hinduism and in many other faiths, we are called to reform this world anew, and make it a place where every human being have hope and life.



WILLEM POST

We will continue with our second part. With joy still in our heart, let's do something new. This is the Great Hall of the Peace Palace. Imagine that this is a living room, which is difficult to imagine with one hundred people, but at least we can try. Let's try to do that and I will invite our guest speakers to sit here on the chairs and pretend we are having a familiar conversation. And of course we need some input, some questions. You know we live in a time with a lot of racism, ignorance, religious tensions, and ethical tensions. Those are the characteristics of the post 9/11 era we are all living in. It is easy to be negative about life and let us be honest, with news coming on a twenty-four-hour basis, it's not so difficult to be negative. But what you need of course is optimism. I hope that when we leave this building – in an hour after a wonderful buffet, we'll see those points of light. And we need you: everyone of you!

I invite our guests to sit here on their chairs. Please don't be shy if you have a question not much related to one of the speeches. That is not a problem. Essentially, we are talking about peace, all these differences in the world, but also what we have heard about concerning all these similarities between religions. Shall we start with a question and it would be also interesting if we would see some interactions between you and today's guest speakers. And well... we will see what happens.

 AUDIENCE | FIRST QUESTION

I suppose from all this that we want peace on the streets, in the house and with our neighbours. I would like to have some tips from you how do you achieve that. Because I have been trying in my little community in Rotterdam where – it is of course an example – when the Muslims in my community needed a place to get together after 6 o'clock during Ramadan, they couldn't find any. When we asked the Council of the municipality, they answer that since it is for religious purposes – not for having an evening coffee – they cannot offer it, they are unable to offer a place for religious activities. We Christians have our churches in many areas of the town, but there aren't mosque in every council. I started to feel uncomfortable about the whole situation, and ashamed when I had to say them "sorry I can't get anything for you". I just don't know how to solve this.

Unfortunately, humans have three main enemies: first of all ignorance – a big problem indeed; second, poverty; and third conflicts. There are a lot of misunderstandings and misconceptions on the Muslim and non-Muslim side, especially after 9/11 and some deadly events in the European countries. Religious events such as Ramadan are happy occasions. Before 9/11 I never heard anything like this, but Muslims should be careful too, because they can go to mosques, to some associations for Muslims and so on, but they should understand each other. Yes, I know that there are a lot of people in Rotterdam who are coming to me asking for some place at the university to worship God during Ramadan. You know, not everybody is religious in Muslim communities, but during Ramadan most of them, about eighty percent, want to feast and pray. We should understand each other, that is our common problem.

AWRAHAM SOETENDORP

I think the Council needs to take things seriously, as there is a difference between religion and State, but not between State and spirituality, this is a difference that we should keep. Just one example, last night we had the Feast of Tabernacles, that is when we build Tabernacles, and our Jewish community in Amsterdam invited the Muslim community, and we were together. I was there with the American ambassador in a big tent and people gathered to celebrate the break of Ramadan. There were young Jewish, Christians and Muslims who decided to go to different places on Sunday, and they went to churches, mosque and synagogue. As in our synagogue we have a glass organ and other instruments, I was playing when a holy book fell from the table. I picked it up and kissed it, because that is our custom. A Muslim youth said “we do that do!”, and immediately there was this connection. When we were outside, one Muslim came to me and said: “Rabbi, we have a problem, we have to do our prayers because now it is one of the moments when we pray.” I said that it was not a problem, as they could pray in the synagogue, but they answered that maybe the synagogue was not suitable for Muslim prayers. I said I knew that and asked them to follow me and showed them one of our rooms upstairs. They were up, and we downstairs, and after about fifteen minutes they came down and said “Thank you so much for this wonderful prayer.” So I said to everyone “You know that for Muslims to pray in a synagogue complex could be the most normal thing in the world, but it indeed may well have been the first time in history that happened.”

My question in this context could sound perhaps a bit academic. It relates to the question of truth, language and the Jewish, Christian and Muslim tradition. You [Awraham Soetendorp] just mentioned kissing the holy book. One of the profound or less profound differences when we are in the way we talk about mysticism in the three Abrahamic religions, and of all the other forms of spirituality or religion, as this is through the use of language. For most of the people, truth is always related to language, not to beauty. So language is, according to great Buddhist scholars, both the liberation of the mind and its prison. Mr. Momo and you all spoke about mysticism and how its languages dissolve. But on a lower level enormous and great difficulties occur. Seeing religions through language is the source of a lot of beauty but also of a lot of problems. I am curious to hear a few of your personal ideas about the position of language.

FRANS WIJSEN

I tend to agree with you, that was why I made the point that we cannot fully understand each other because of the languages. When Mr. Akgündüz said we *must* understand each other, I fully agree with him. But *must*, to me, refers to a moral obligation and also to the enormous stress that I *must* understand you. Let us accept that we partially understand each other, still we can respect each other, we can collaborate with each other, but I am also afraid that when we speak about religious issues we are literally reaching a point that we simply say “ok this is the end.” But I agree with you that we have other levels of communication: mysticism, what Giuseppe Scattolin spoke about, Ms. Reedijk talked about rituals and rituals are very important in mysticism. But in interfaith dialogue we use language, we hate to accept that our levels of communication are limited.

AHMAD AKGÜNDÜZ

There are lots of examples concerning the use of language. First of all, we believe in God. There is no difference between God and Allah. I have held a lecture at the University of Leuven about the essence of God and its attributes. After my conference many of Christian students came to me asking “Do you believe that God is the same as Allah?” I replied “Yes. There is no difference.” We are discussing this at our university and we do not see any difference about the essence of God. Yes, there are some differences in the attributes of God, that is natural. In my opinion, all Abrahamic religions have a common language in religious concepts.

88 Language is a very important issue, especially religious language and mystical language. There is a famous Sufi *nehari* who said that the greater the vision is, the less the language can express it. In reading Sufi and mystical texts I always find that mystics cannot express the reality of what they have experienced. In Islam, between mystics and jurists there is always been a fighting, because jurists like to define everything and mystics maintain that is not possible to define anything. Reality is always beyond, you can never express reality completely. I would like to add that nobody can speak in the name of God, because only God can speak in his own name. I cannot say “God says this and that,” because already by doing this I make myself speak and not God. This is very important because especially in the religious language of Christianity and Islam we tend to be too critical, putting too much pressure on reducing the words of God to our standard, rather than lifting ourselves to the word of God. There is a famous Sufi saying: “Praise to God who gave to his creature not the way to know him, but the way not to know him.” Mystical ignorance also has a sense of God.

CARL W. ERNST

Actually, in pre-modern times there were a great deal of more shared languages available, at least among the Jews, Christians and Muslims. Because of the fact that they all grouped on Greek logical language. But in our modern times, when the urgency of the communication is much greater, the languages have become dispersed and new languages, new types of vocabulary have entered after the Enlightenment. I observed that in the majority of Muslim countries there is a big split between those who have learned a language of the European education and those who are in a very pre-modern traditional ambience.

AWRAHAM SOETENDORP

We had this wonderful music, for which I would really like to congratulate the musicians, because it expresses the soul of the Jewish music, and I had difficulty restraining myself from standing up and dancing. It is the rhythm of the melody that has words. We know about non-verbal communication, but it takes us a long time to realize that the great part of the language is not a cognitive language, but something that comes without effort; and I would draw on what you said [Giuseppe Scattolin], one very important addition to our intercourse in the world is silence. When a meeting of ministers starts with silence, it is allowing for that. When I go into a room when nobody is there and I sit, and then people come, then the atmosphere is different. I learned from Eastern predominations the value of a moment of silence. We have many difficulties with silence.

AUDIENCE | THIRD QUESTION

I live in the Diamantbuurt quarter in Amsterdam, a quarter with a very negative reputation. But I live there and I can tell you that it is a wonderful place to live, because there are so many nationalities. There is a Muslim community with whom, after those terrible things that happened in the past, we all came together. They invited people from the diverse culture of the quarter to have dinner and be together tomorrow night. I don't say that everyone is coming, but there is much more going on between us.

WILLEM POST

Thank you so much. We need these stories more than any news. That is my personal opinion, as I am more or less involved in journalism. We have so many problems, but almost never read stories like that. And I think there are so many more.

AUDIENCE | FOURTH QUESTION

The identity of the referred group is one of the most formidable obstacles to peace. In the dialogue between the three Abrahamic faiths, which role plays their centuries-old identities? Are they prepared to sacrifice their own identity to open the road to peace?

AHMAD AKGÜNDÜZ

We do not need to sacrifice our identity. We can live in peace and harmony whilst preserving our identity. Let me mention an example from Islam: in Beyo Kavard there where at least 450 Jewish, Christian and Muslim people living together. One day I was invited to visit the place and I asked the name of the family I was invited to. The owner of the house told me that his name was George, and that he was a Roman Catholic. “Are you giving *iftar* for Muslims?” I asked, “No,” he replied, “We are twenty families and there are 13 non-Muslim families. During Ramadan all families are giving *iftars* for each other every day. Now is my turn, Welcome to my house.” We do not need to sacrifice our religion, our nation's identity in order to live in peace and harmony, if we are able to share our common things and respect the differences, that is enough. Integration is not the problem, the main problem is communication.

AWRAHAM SOETENDORP

I would just like to add one thing to what you [Ahmad Akgündüz] said. When one feels safe in one's identity, one is more open to others. That seems like a

paradox. Therefore strengthening one's own identity is not an aggression to the others. I would like to share with you a small example of something happened last September. The American ambassador was consulting with me concerning the question of where to hold the commemorative event for 9/11 and I said: "Why don't you use the synagogue?" Because of a coincidence, two days later of when 9/11 took place, we were going to celebrate the 275th anniversary of our synagogue. So we changed the celebration and made it into a commemoration, and it was one of the first commemorations of the 11th of September. When discussing how to have the service, we asked ourselves where will the people speak from. We had a *dima*, a place for rabbis, but we needed a place for Muslims and the imam, and the priest, and the several ambassadors to attend. It took me some time before I realized that everybody should just speak from the very same place. At the day, nobody felt anything negative, they all spoke from the same place, and I realized that there were twenty-five ambassadors in the synagogue, amongst others from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Iraq and Sudan. For the first time in history there were so many Muslim ambassadors in a synagogue, and it changed us.

FRANS WIJSEN

I tend to agree with Mr Akgündüz and at the same time, disagree with him. There are many examples when people of different faiths come together and celebrate together, still keeping their identity. But as we all know, there are also many instances when people use or misuse their identity to profit from it. Identity is a tricky thing. As I said, identity has to do with self-awareness. When you say *self* that means there is a boundary somewhere between me and the others. There are people with more than one identity, people can have religious identity, political, social, general identity.

AUDIENCE

I think identity is a very broad aspect of our being. We all have different religious rituals, ideas, identities, and traditions, but what is important is that we do not identify with all that. Because what we really are is defined by a spark of light within us that is our real identity. And the more we are open to that, the more we can understand each other.

AWRAHAM SOETENDORP

In the Netherlands, each year the parliament holds a session of meditation and prayer for the different religions before the official opening of the parliament.

This year, the church was filled with about a thousand people, members of the government, members of many religions and with people from everywhere.

AUDIENCE | FIFTH QUESTION

I would like to ask each one of you to say a few words about how you see peace, what is the meaning of peace for you, and for your religion.

AHMAD AKGÜNDÜZ

The meaning of Islam is peace. But in this meaning, peace is not only for us, but also for all human beings and the creatures of the Creator. That is Islam's approach to peace.

AWRAHAM SOETENDORP

The word *shalom* means peace and comes from the word *shale*, which means whole. So wholeness is peace. There is a statement in Jewish sources that God goes to war to establish peace. And it is strange that there is so much passion to create peace. The strange thing is that when there is a conspiracy to do evil there is so much involved and much sacrifice, but when there is a conspiracy to do good we are somehow weak.

CARL W. ERNST

Somebody wrote that peace is an internal preparation between wars. And that is too often the case. Speaking for myself, it's something that can only result from seeing another person as himself and trying to understand that person.

FRANS WIJSEN

I am a Roman Catholic and I tend to agree with Mr Soetendorp about wholeness and harmony. To my mind comes the vision of Paul II: the development of the soul and the development of the body go together.

GIUSEPPE SCATTOLIN

Peace is the result of the golden rule, which is very common to older religions: Do not do to the others what you do not want the others do to you. If we all take this rule as the basis for our moral and spiritual behaviour we can not go astray. One short Sufi story: They said that when Abraham converted to monotheism he was very proud to be the first monotheist who believed in one God. One night a Zoroastrian came to his house asking for shelter, and he said "How dare you

come to my house, I am a monotheist. Go away!" Then God spoke to him:
"What have you done Abraham?" He said " Oh God, you have given me faith
and I don't want to share anything with those pagans."
And God said to him "Look Abraham. This man has
been living seventy years. Every day I gave him the sun,
the rain and the water. For seventy years he didn't recognize
me, and you couldn't keep up with him
for one single
night?"





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