

THE INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

by

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I.

Every encounter between various cultures takes place as a meeting of living faiths. It is almost impossible for a cultural encounter to be accomplished without the direct involvement of the religious traditions.

Every nation is expressed through its culture and its religion too. The culture is the body of history, while the religion remains the soul of the people. A real encounter of cultures includes the meeting of their living faiths.

Not theology in the strict sense of the term, but anthropology in the broadest meaning of this word lies at the very heart of the dialogue. The two main points are the freedom of man and the problem of evil. After that and as a material for the anthropological argumentation follows the theological discussion. First of all the anthropology, and then the theology!

The perspective of every interreligious dialogue must be philosophical and anthropological. The discussion cannot be abstract, but concrete and human. No "heavenly" affairs are at stake, but only very concrete human concerns. The argumentation has to be reasonable, the terminology remains rational, and the entire atmosphere of such a dialogue has nothing to do with a dogmatic quarrel or a strict doctrinal fight.

The most fundamental concern of every human being is the suffering. The social injustice, the human pain, the natural disaster, the war, the illness, the death, all these constitute the evil in the world. Man is a suffering being from his birth until his death.

The Eastern religious tradition remains very sensitive for the problem of evil. Perhaps it is more concerned than the modern Western philosophy. For instance, it is the famous Rene Descartes (1596-1650), who identifies man with thinking, not with suffering, according to his well known sentence: "*cogito ergo sum*" (I think, then I exist). Just the opposite view is expressed from a contemporary philosopher of the Eastern European tradition with strong religious influence, Nicolas Berdiaev (1874-1948): "*doleo ergo sum*" (I suffer, then I exist).

If evil is the most profound and basic experience of every human being and it characterises the Eastern way of thought, then it is rather inevitable that every religion takes very seriously into account the suffering of man. Not only as such, but also - if not mainly! - in the interreligious dialogue the problems of evil remains at the heart of the agenda of such a dialogue.

The suffering of man is the starting point of every interreligious dialogue. It is not a humanitarian imperative, but it is a long and strong theological tradition. It does not come from "outside", from the secular side, but it belongs to the very essence of every religion, it remains "inside" the sacred area among the discussing representatives of the various religious traditions involved in the dialogue.

The other main point of the dialogue is the freedom of man. The source of evil is very closely connected with the freedom. God had not caused the evil, but He had offered the freedom; man has used his freedom unlimited, i.e. without any concern for his neighbours. The

outcome of this false use of human freedom or rather the abuse of freedom is the coming of the evil in the world.

To avoid the evil man has to use his freedom again; not in the wrong sense, but in the right direction. Instead of abuse man has to exercise the God given freedom in favour of his neighbours. Between the Self and the Other man has to make a choice; according to the Christian doctrine the right choice is in favour of the Other, as a kind of self-sacrifice. This is the main stream of insights given by every religious moral teaching concerning the problem of evil in connection with the freedom of man.

These theological considerations have a special importance for the current situation. They point out to the need for a more just society, for a sustainable relation of man to his natural environment, for a more responsible attitude towards society, nature, man, and every creature. To deal with man, to give priority to the human suffering, and to struggle for the freedom of man, is not only a kind of sociopolitical duty, but it is also a fundamental theological imperative.

II.

Technology, especially today, cuts across religions and civilisations. On a short term basis it satisfies our daily needs, but in the long term it threatens our freedom, as we can see from the use of nuclear power in war or in peace, from the destruction of the natural environment and the problems of information technology. One of the main dilemmas of technology is especially the choice between economy and ecology.

Technology should make a moral choice: either it will obey the demands of economy, or it will choose the priorities of ecology. If technology has as its criterion the personal profit of the capitalist investor, then it will submit to economy. If the main criterion is the social benefit of employment and the main concern the protection of environment, then technology follows the road of ecology. Thus, modern advanced technology confronts an inevitable moral dilemma: economy or ecology?

The difference between the economical and ecological choice is at the same time axiological and ontological. With economy we aim at quantitative development, in ecology we aim at qualitative development. The question is no longer so simple: yes or no to development. But it is about the most delicate and immensely critical dilemma: which development, what kind of development, quantitative or qualitative, economic or ecological?

In the first case we aim at increasing the quantity of products and services. In the second case we seek a better quality of life. In

quantitative development "what" and "how much" we produce are of chief consideration. In qualitative development the question "how" and "why" we produce is of primary concern.

The economy serves quantitative development and ecology serves qualitative development. The financial-quantitative development is based on the individual and his interest, his selfishness and utilitarianism, his individualism and egocentricity. The criterion remains as the individual interest of the capitalist investor-employer.

On the other hand, ecological qualitative development is based on disinterest and altruism, and the neglect of self for the sake of other things such as the physical and social environment. That which counts is no longer the individual with his own interests but nature and work, the entire universe and man as a whole, natural and the social environment. Instead of capital serving as the unique force, the social and environmental aspects of man should be seen as the most important. It scarcely needs to be said that behind all of these factors are hidden individualism, self-centredness, vainglory and utilitarianism. Technology is becoming the other face of morality. Every religion today must confront technological individualism.

III.

Morality has two faces: one is called technology, the other politics. The reality of every religion requires it to cultivate today a political morality. Otherwise we find ourselves drifting between a hypocritical non-political position, reminiscent of pharisaism, and a hyper-critical fragmented politics, reminiscent of zealotism. Apart from these two extreme positions, we need to give meaning to politics, to redirect it towards morality and to give to it ontological significance.

The initial question: "What is politics?" often remains unanswered. Politics is not the art of the attainable, as conservative circles claim, because as such immorality is justified and the cynicism in the Jesuit doctrine "the purpose sanctifies the means" is endorsed. Politics is not a technique by which one seizes power for as such politics becomes a depersonalisation of humanity. If in the past theology had to cope with politics, today especially it cannot but be the pioneer in its formation.

A catalyst in these developments was the shattering events of the last twenty years with the collapse of the regimes of so-called "existing socialism" in Eastern Europe. Specifically, the political message of these

events was the following: ideology is waning. The process of democratisation in the ex-Eastern alliance is based on the demolition of every ideological scheme. It is not about a simple process from socialism to liberalism, as naive observers of politics imagine, neither is it an exchange of communism with capitalism, as selfish opportunists would wish for.

The people of Eastern Europe are thirsty for freedom, not liberalism. The frenzied consumption that they were engaged in at the beginning of the political change was only the symptom of a 'child's illness'. The deprivation of freedom for centuries was expressed in the deprivation of comforts. For these reasons the people articulated their thirst for freedom as a hunger for consumption.

What they longed for was freedom, not liberalism not consumption. What they hated was ideology, any ideology no matter what the shade. They yearned for life and fled from ideology. What they desired was a meaning for life, for wherever life begins there ideology ends. Wherever an ideology dies, life is resurrected.

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The fate of religion lies in the hands of God and in those of the faithful men. If God is able to resurrect from stones the children of Abraham, He can also allow the destruction of Jerusalem, the collapse of Rome, the fall of Constantinople. This means that we must neither rest from not avoid our responsibilities by falsely relying solely on the love of God. God granted us freedom and responsibility and it is for this reason that He has allowed the destruction of the "holy cities" in every phase of history.

It is our duty to carry out our responsibilities especially in the important area of the religion today. The interreligious dialogue in the frame of the contemporary dialogue of civilisations is an excellent opportunity for every faithful man to carry out his duty. To serve such a goal is a service for the sake of religion and humanity too.

We have to confess that dialogue has been misunderstood both in theory and in practice. Thus we shall offer some clarifications in order to resolve a number of misunderstandings that have rather come about in good faith, noting at the same time what an interreligious dialogue is and what it is not.

1. Dialogue is not a ‘bargain’, neither does it resemble ‘diplomacy’. It is not some kind of market dealing (*do ut des*), neither a commercial transaction (like winning or losing). Moreover, interreligious dialogue has nothing in common with diplomacy, which is the continuation of war by different means. Undoubtedly, it has nothing to do with the pretense of public relations, neither with the pharisaic hypocrisy of ‘friendship attack’ during a period of truce between opposite camps. Finally, inter-religious dialogue is not an issue of politics or economy.

2. Dialogue is a theological and anthropological pledge. It corresponds to the quintessence of religion, which is defined as the relation between man and the holy. Since each religion associates man with the divine distinctively and in its own way, it follows that all religions together and in common should be related to one another through the means of theological dialogue.

3. It is impossible for religions to preach unity within their confines and at the same time practice disunity towards their neighbours beyond their limits. In other words, interreligious dialogue is a consistency and extension with regards to the essence of religion, which in turn is a God – man dialogue.

Apart from its theological basis, interreligious dialogue also has anthropological foundations. Speech (*logos*) itself is dialogue (*dialogos*). Each and every act of human speech is always addressed by someone to someone else. Speech is a dialogue between me and the other. Thus in its essence each speech is a dialogue, and it should not turn into a monologue or a controversy.

The first enemy of dialogue is monologue, which functions in a selfish, autistic, and narcissistic manner, as if someone is talking to himself being confined to his person and self-satisfied with his ego. On the other hand, the second enemy of dialogue is the sheer controversy, boring strife, and incessant polemics, something like ‘opposition for opposition’.

Nevertheless, beyond selfish monologue and quarrelsome controversy lies the domain of fruitful dialogue, along with its decent and fair critique, which does not invalidate human empathy. ‘*Plato may be a friend, but truth is above all my friend*’: this should be the ‘golden rule’ for every dialogue. The dictum of St Paul, ‘*being truthful in love*’ (Eph 4:15) should be the motto of every interreligious dialogue.