

6.2 Interreligious and/or Intercultural Dialogue?

Abdul Aziz Saïd and Paolo Dall'Oglio

Comments on Paolo Dall'Oglio by Abdul Aziz Saïd

Understanding the many contexts that shape expressions of religious identity and belief – especially cultural, historical, political, and economic contexts – is one of the great challenges of interreligious dialogue. Father Paolo has done an excellent job of disentangling Islamic spirituality and core values from the complicated and painful history of modern Western-Islamic relations.

Father Paolo is also wise in recognizing that “there are as many different” ‘Islams’ as there are many different ‘Wests’.” And his acknowledgment of Western triumphalism (“Western culture, although very plural in its expressions, is in fact very ideological seen from the outside”) is worth discussing. Western culture has much to offer, but efforts to assert the “finality” or unique merit of Western values are experienced by contemporary Muslims as intolerant and humiliating.

Honest people can differ in their reading of Pope Benedict's intentions as expressed in the Regensburg address, and all people of goodwill should reject the actions of those who used his remarks as an excuse for deeds that have deepened the Christian-Muslim divide. Nonetheless, there are good reasons to suspect that the more offensive passages in his speech were not altogether accidental (as stated on point 5¹), and that they reflect inexperience in interfaith relations, particularly Muslim-Christian relations. Pope Benedict is a skilled theologian; let us hope that he will begin to reflect on his theology of religious diversity in new ways, within a context of human and spiritual relatedness. Let us also hope that he will take advantage of the knowledge attained by the many deeply learned Catholics (including Father Paolo) who are deeply committed to dialogue

1 The author comments on the Interview with Paolo Dall'Oglio, section 6.1 of this book.

with Islam. This possibility was suggested when, several days after Regensburg, Pope Benedict invoked the spirit of Vatican II by quoting its eloquent affirmation of beliefs and values that Muslims and Christians share.

Whatever our evaluation of the Regensburg address, there is a point that has been raised by Pope Benedict that we ought to take up: the issue of *reciprocity*. Pope Benedict has focused on reciprocity primarily as it relates to freedom of religious practice and expression, in the West and in the Islamic world. This is a valid concern. Let us not stop with this issue; however, let us also consider the many other reciprocities that might be cultivated in interfaith and intercultural relations: reciprocities of respect, of spiritual recognition, of acknowledging relatedness, of political cooperation, of commitment to conflict resolution and human rights. Father Paolo touches on this possibility when he speaks of “mutual recognition of others’ values” (point 6). Reciprocity should not be a narrow demand from one side to another; rather, it should be a framework for dialogue, a basis for improving relations in many spheres, and for building consensus about shared values.

Father Paolo has quite wisely pointed out that “it is because we do not know enough God’s will that by consequence we try to impose our own issues on others &. [I]f the children of Abraham deepened their knowledge of the will of God, they would discover a marvellous place of harmony” (point 11). Islam and the West, like Islam and Christianity, are “between stories.” The old stories of confrontation have become tired and deeply constraining. The illusions upon which they are based have become transparent. Let us rededicate ourselves to creating new stories of cooperation and complementarity.



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Preliminary Conclusions by Paolo Dall'Oglio

I will assume here that inter-religious dialogue is a part of inter-cultural dialogue, and that religion is an aspect of culture. Believers can conceive religion as super-cultural or extra-cultural, but the psychosocial phenomena happen anyway in the cultural context.

The major misconceptions come from the uncritical and unconscious projection of one's own conceptions onto others' cultural worlds. This produces impressions and judgments perceived by the other as not correct, as unjust, or even as persecution, and which provoke reactions that can be violent.

For example, what is called "common sense" is very often uncommon; what is considered "evident" can be questionable for others, and what is considered "rational", "objective", "absolute", and "essential" can be seen otherwise by others. Even the Declaration of Human Rights can be perceived as an imposed Western scheme of reference. Items like "person" or "individual" in his relation to the group can be seen in deeply different ways. Therefore, priorities in rights and values can also be seen very differently.

What empowers a concept to become "shared enough" to build a society? It can be by force (force can be globalization, technical and scientific superiority, dominance of one language, number, historical weight...) or by conviction, never completely free from "force influences" (the weight of belonging, the anguish of loneliness, the fear of exclusion...). Even democracy can be perceived as a system of force to be resisted.

So, what can we build inter-religious, common life on? And what does respect mean? Answering these questions is already the object and the fruit of dialogue. To believe in dialogue is already ideology or religion. It is bearing witness to one's own values. You will not meet others if you are afraid to be yourself. Each one will bear witness to his own experience of truth, and meeting others is an essential part of that experience of truth.

In my opinion, misconceptions come from the pretension of understanding the other without the active participati-



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on of the other, whereas concepts come out of a dialogue process. Is this opinion shared in the context of inter-religious interaction in the Euro-Mediterranean cultural area? By looking at how people are behaving, it is not shared. Just ask the three Abrahamic traditions: What is the Holy Land? What does Jerusalem mean? What does prophecy mean? And violence? And law?

However, you will probably find some people from the three traditions able and willing to understand each other in deep dialogue about their dynamic experience of conceptualization. Will they win elections? Or have they other means to attract the populations of the area to the fruit of their shared experience? Wouldn't this be a good occasion for a "jihad" of resistance to force?