

The Interfaith Dialog in the Global World

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During one of his interviews, French novelist and essayist André Malraux summarized the uncertain destiny of the human kind with a famous formula: «the 21st century will be religious, or will not be.» However, more than forty years after this formula was uttered, it is not easy to foresee what the future of religions will be in the 21st century. Religions have to face a tremendous challenge produced by the rapid mutation of the world. They are jeopardized by two opposite dangers: on the one hand, «relativism» that transforms them into ordinary products that can be consumed at will, on the other hand, «absolutism» that makes them tools for a totalitarian organization of societies. There is no doubt that this challenge is the more or less direct aftermath of the incredibly rapid development of science and technology. So there is no hope to avoid the two above-mentioned dangers without an in-depth examination of the consequences of this development.

In each religion, the theologians of the 21st century find two major tasks on their agenda. The first task is the revision of their worldview under the light shed by the scientific discoveries. It becomes obvious that a literalistic reading of the Holy Scriptures is contradicted by scientific facts. Such a revision already began centuries ago, but it has to be renewed permanently because of the unceasing progress of scientific inquiry. It creates a tension within each religion between those who accept to revise the way they understand their Scriptures, and those who refuse this revision and stick to a literalistic approach. The second task is a collective endeavor for all religions: they have to understand why there are so many of them. This endeavor is just beginning now.

Of course, the existence of many religions is an obvious fact, but there is a gap between seeing other religions, and understanding why there are other religions. If we restrict our focus to the Middle Ages, for instance, the Jews, Christians and Muslims had more or less conflicting relationships, and knew very little of the other faiths. Peaceful coexistence was only separate coexistence, during which nobody really tried to understand the neighbor's religion. On the contrary, during warfare, the necessity to fight was always justified, on both sides, by the fact that one detained the only true faith, and that the enemy was misled by a false religion. As a consequence of this mutual indifference, or disdain, theologians worked out elaborate systems to explain the reason of the plurality of (false or imperfect) religions, and of the uniqueness of the true religion (that was always their *own* religion).

It is this situation that is now changing very quickly. The causes of this mutation are manifold. The development of academic studies, and the translations of sacred texts into the most common languages have made the corpus of the main religions available to the many. The mere development of air traffic is making encounters between the members of all faiths much easier than it used to be. The model of secular, liberal societies that is spreading at a worldwide scale encourages discussion and dialog between people. There is now a growing awareness of the diversity of faiths, and of the differences in their teachings. We are the first generation of the human kind to experience such a dialog at a global scale, very much as we are the first generation that has ever contemplated the astonishing pictures of planet Earth taken from space. This collective experience brings new spiritual information. The

theologians are just becoming to investigate and evaluate its consequences. It is easy to foresee that their impact is going to be dramatic.

It should be clear that theology is at the level of an *interpretation* of the Holy Scriptures and oral traditions. The theological work that has been developing for centuries in each of our faiths aimed at articulating revelation and reason. As a consequence, the theological elaboration that was obtained in each religion was mainly centered on its own self-consistency. In this prospect, the existence of other faiths appeared as a troublesome, unpleasant fact that had to be incorporated in some way into the theological construction. To this aim, a peripheral place was allotted to this uncomfortable fact within the theological systems, according to two main patterns.

The first pattern simply consists in excluding the other religions by denying them any status. In this prospect, only one religion is true, and the other religions are only fake systems, mere imitations that have been made by human beings either to divert their thirst of spirituality, or to fight the only true religion. The fundamentalist currents in all religions promote this hard pattern. There is simply no room for the other religions in the theological constructions of the first kind. The existence of other religions is not a significant fact, let alone a spiritual fact.

The second pattern is generally defended in mainstream theological constructions. It consists in finding a peripheral location for the other religions that are generally understood as incomplete systems including reflects of the only truth within a lot of falsehood. They are considered as a preparation of the final revelation that is the only one to incorporate all the Truth that God wants to unveil to the human kind. This soft pattern is the opinion of the majority of the believers in all religions. In this theological construction of the second kind, the members of the other faiths have to be gently convinced that they will find the plenitude of Truth in the only complete religion.

Let us give two examples of the second pattern, respectively drawn from Christianity and Islam. In mainstream Roman catholic theology, other faiths were considered for centuries as being only a preparation to the coming of Jesus Christ, as far as they were only given «seeds of God's Word» (the famous *logoi spermatikoi* or *semina verbi* of the Fathers of the Church). This doctrine of course was held primarily for the faiths that came before incarnation, but also for the one that came later, that is Islam, at least when it was not considered as a mere counterfeit. In mainstream Islamic theology, all religions were considered as actually revealed by God through the messages of the prophets. However, although all religions were true at the beginning, their disciples have altered the original messages so radically that a last revelation was made necessary, that is, Islam. This explanation based on an *interpretation* of some Koranic verses is called *tahrîf* (or «alteration») in Islamic theology.

To cut a long story short, fundamentalists see the other religions as false, and mainstream theologians stick to the idea that the other religions are incomplete. At that stage, the main issue is to know how religions can address the new situation in which their members found themselves. The religions are very often accused of promoting a worldview that encourages the exclusion of the others, and prompts people to make war. It is obvious that the theological constructions of fundamentalists open the way to violence. But what is the value of the condemnation of violence issued by mainstream theologians if the latter have such a narrow view on the other religions? They may try to promote spectacular interfaith meetings, or gathering of talented theologians. The results of these meetings are solemn declarations in favor of peace. But can these efforts be more than ineffective diplomatic action, as far as

disdain remains deeply rooted in the theological background of each of those who signed the treaties or declarations? Religions now suffer from a terrible deficit of credibility among the public opinion that rightly criticizes their inefficiency in condemning violence perpetrated in the name of God.

As a matter of fact, the theological constructions elaborated for centuries can be compared to the cosmological worldview of the Middle Ages, that was built upon Aristotelian physics and Ptolemaic astronomy. This worldview has been held for about two millennia. It is well known that this cosmological construction interprets the complexity of the astronomical phenomena with an elaborate system of concentric spheres. The medieval cosmos was centered on the Earth, or may be, more accurately, on the astronomer himself as far as it was an attempt to describe the observational evidence. The system became more and more unable to accommodate the accumulation of new astronomical facts. But the theological constructions of the Jews, Christians and Muslims, and the scientific developments in medieval cosmology were contemporaneous. Many theological interpretations of the Holy Scriptures used this cosmology. In order to preserve a cosmological construction that was so intimately linked to the religious worldview, astronomers added new wheels, epicycles and equants to their complicated machinery. They tried to «save the phenomena», but at a high cost. Such a construction got so heavy that the astronomers themselves became more and more skeptical about the ability of astronomy to actually explain what was going in Heavens. Then came Nicolas Copernicus, who argued that a simple and elegant solution can be found, which not only reproduced the phenomena and was able to predict them with a better level of accuracy, but also proposed a new worldview that was much simpler and more beautiful. The puzzle could be solved, by placing the Sun at the center of the world. In his book «De Revolutionibus Orbis Cœlorum» published in 1543, Copernicus argued that such a place was much more suited to the Sun than to the Earth, as the Sun is the symbol of God's power that grants light and bounty to the whole creation.

The theological constructions are very comparable to the cosmological models, inasmuch as they both attempt to incorporate many facts into a single system. It turns out that we now know that our theologies are centered on themselves as much as the medieval cosmos was centered on the observer. As a consequence, they incorporate the existence of other faiths by means of theological constructions that are pretty similar to the wheels, epicycles or equants of Ptolemaic cosmology. The accumulation of new spiritual facts brought by a better understanding of what the other religions actually preach, requires constructions that are more and more elaborate. The systems that explain out their existence become more and more artificial. As a result, more and more people doubt the interest and authenticity of religions that seem to preach so different truths and claim to own the only truth, exactly as people before the Copernican revolution doubted the ability of astronomy to explain the cosmos.

What is needed is a change of vision that will transform our «theologico-centric» theologies, that is, our theologies centered on the issue of their own self-consistency and robustness with respect to any new fact, to truly «theo-centric» theologies, in which God's light and bounty is at the center of the construction. We need a Copernican revolution in theology, as much as we needed it in cosmology five centuries ago. In this Copernican view that would replace the Ptolemaic view, the diversity of religions will appear as a «natural» phenomenon, that is a phenomenon wished and created by God, as much as the Earth found its natural place among the other planets.

It is time now to see at last that a third kind of theological construction is needed, that remains faithful to its sacred texts and teachings, but respects God's will and mystery. We must admit that the plurality of religions remains, in spite of the efforts of the defenders of all religions to eliminate this plurality. It is a result of God's will. We must accept that our theological constructions are creations by human beings who have been sublimely inspired by the Sacred Scriptures. But all human languages incorporate intrinsic limits, and they cannot encapsulate the whole of Truth, because only God is the absolute Truth.

It is true that the various religions say things that are pretty different about God. The issue is the following: how do we define religious truth? Could we define the truth of a religion as its ability to guide its followers to the knowledge of the ultimate Truth, that is, of God? Religions are true as much as maps are true. The usefulness of the map consists in its accuracy to guide the reader on the correct path to his final destination. Unfortunately, theological constructions of the first and second kind are limited to a very naive conception of truth when they address the existence of other religions. It is as if they said: «my religion and your religion are telling very different stories about God. Since my religion is true, yours is necessarily wrong.» Could we accept once for all that both religions can be true inasmuch as they propose dogmas and rituals that are going to prepare us slowly but steadily to face ultimate knowledge?

Theologians of all religions now have to incorporate the new spiritual information associated to the discovery of the diversity of religions. The task is urgent. They have to reconsider their spiritual heritage and modify their construction by taking away the epicycles that were incorporated to explain out the existence of other religions as false or incomplete systems. They have to move away not only from the narrowness of hateful exclusion proposed by the first pattern, but also from the temptation of pitiful inclusion proposed by the second pattern. What is needed is the third pattern of a «non-exclusive» *and* «non-inclusive» construction in which God's bounty *requires* the existence of other religions to fulfill the spiritual needs of the marvelous diversity of human beings, as much as God's mystery, beyond any attempt to describe him or summarize him in a formula, *requires* the differences in the dogmas and rituals.

As the Koran says, «had God pleased, He could have made of you one community: but it is His wish to prove you by that which He has bestowed upon you. Vie with each other in good works, for to God you shall all return and He will resolve for you your differences.»¹

The scientific and technological developments have brought forth the idea of a plurality of books written by God. The natural trend of theological constructions is to state that there is only a single Book, the book of Scripture. Then theologies had to accommodate the idea that God has written two books: the book of Scripture and the book of Nature. These books are written in very different languages. Frequently, they seem to be in contradiction. However, after a long and painful introspection, our theologies were led to revise their positions, and to accept that the book of Scripture and the book of Nature speak the same Truth, although this Truth is sometimes difficult to elucidate and enunciate. But it is only half way. Now the other half of the way has to be done. God not only has written the book of Nature, a single book for a single cosmos shared by all human beings, but he has written *many* books of Scripture, because of the impossibility to capture the absolute Truth within a single human language. For this reason, the relationship of theological constructions with the scientific worldview and with the existence of other religions are intimately linked and have to be addressed

¹ Koran 5, 48.

simultaneously. As a matter of fact, we progressively realize that God never ceases to speak: He speaks under the veils of the phenomena in Nature, and He speaks under the veils of the Revelations that are adapted to the human cultures and give birth to them.

The Koran also says: «If the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be spent before the Words of my Lord are spent, though We brought replenishment the like of it.»²

The task appears as an immense challenge, and we have so little time. But it may be also very simple, because we do not need to rebuild our theological constructions from scratch. We must only incorporate the acknowledgment that our systems are incomplete, into our systems. In 1931, Kurt Gödel discovered that incompleteness is present within any given formal system that is powerful enough to include arithmetic. As a consequence, within any formal system, there are many true statements that cannot be demonstrated. Something similar occurs with God, who surely knows the collection of all true statements because he is the source of all Truth. He escapes from complete description by any formal system. Here, we only need to remember the teachings of the mystics and holy persons of all our traditions, who repeatedly testified that «God is greater» than the ideas we make about Him. To say things simply, we need to take *humility* into account. This is the price to pay if we want to save our religions from the double danger of the relativism and absolutism. It is a cheap price, if we consider that, by the same token, we may contribute to drive the human kind away from its own foolishness.³

² Koran 18, 109.

³ I acknowledge a fruitful discussion with Charles Harper on these topics in May 2003.