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Religious Dialogue in Postmodernity – Necessity, Chances, Perspectives

Abstract

The complicated social and political context of postmodernity with its unmistakable, nihilism, self-sufficiency, secularization and globalization - accentuated by the rapid progress of last minute technologies, is far from cancelling the purpose and the utility of the interreligious dialogue spiritual enhancement of humanity. Even more we can say that it is enhanced. In the current study the pragmatic view of necessity chances and perspectives of this type of dialogue thoroughly contextual to the times we live in, is attempted.

Keywords

interreligious dialogue,
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1 Necessity of Dialogue

It's very well understood that postmodernity, with all its means of communication, based on last moment technology, gives to the dialogue, as a form of human interaction, the biggest role ever in history. Through e-mail, chat, telephone, fax, videoconference, radio or TV, walky-talky and so on – people send each other information. An interesting question is tormenting the laic researchers and theologians as well: can this type of dialogue be a form of human interaction? Or, better said, what percent of human personality is lost when information exchange occurs through modern technology?

Obviously there is a loss, sometimes with incalculable consequences¹. Feelings, human emotions are closed behind LCD screens, and the voice modulations get a metallic distortion through the sound channels. And no matter how high performance the devices used to playback this informal coordinates are, they won't be able to fill that void of expression created by the lack of face to face relation.

Paul Lakeland said: “postmodernity contains within its elements both emancipator and demonic”² by pressing the alarm bottom on the danger of replacing the live dialogue with technology mediated dialogue (seen as a dead dialogue), that takes place through sophisticated devices of our time, we cannot deny the decisive role of interreligious dialogue, that has as a highest purpose is to make the humanity aware of the personal nature of the relationship between God and humans alike, in this world of spiritual disaster. In this context a

¹ E.g. the couples that meet through on-line dating sites, and get married, only to realize that in real life things are different than in the virtual space.

² P. Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, (Guides to Theological Inquiry Series, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 89.

contemporary catholic theologian of missiology that was talking about Christian preaching in Asia said: “the interreligious dialogue is a dialogue of redemption that should embrace all aspects of life. For this purpose the interreligious dialogue is achieved on different levels: language, arts, music, liturgical service, theology, mysticism, etc.”³. As we can see all these areas of communication have in common the exploitation of the personalized character of dialogue –the first and the most defining note of this, but in the same extent the most affected by the change of paradigm imposed by postmodernity.

In a few words, it is necessary to analyze more characterizing notes of interreligious dialogue, in order to see how deep the modification made to contemporary mentality are or can be.

For example, a defining feature of this is, as the name says, the religious content. We cannot surpass this detail, because, in many situations the discussions between the different religions representatives are stereotypical, without reaching the thick of the problem which implicates the debate of some ideas that sends one’s thought to the relationship between man and God. Severely affected by the secularism ,overwhelm by the living of consuming societies the idea of religion trembles, in postmodern thinking being reduced and even replaced, often, with ideologies that, even if they precede some positive practices, are no more than some dangerous surrogates.

The interreligious dialogue must lead to the discovery of the *dialogical character of the religious truth*. In case of Christianity, Jesus Himself, as a divine truth incarnated, gives through his entire activity a living example about the universal character of dialogue. The Apostles preached this truth with the fervor of those fully believing his veracity, being able to suffer punishments for their faith. So unusual are the attitudes of some orthodox monks, who contest any form of dialogical

³ J. D. D. Dao, *Preghiera rinnovata per una nuova era missionaria in Asia*, in: *Inculturation*, XV, Roma, 1994, p. 43.

confession of the truth, based on the reason of an ecclesiastic conviction of the contacts with the heretics. Jesus himself talked and sat at the table with the custom officers and the sinners (Mark 2,16) and the Apostles if they didn't preach the profane Gospel, the Christianity wouldn't get to be an universal religion, at its actual spreading scale.

We can still distinguish between preaching and dialogue⁴. They both have the same purpose: spreading the Truth, but they are different in shape and content. The preaching can also be a monologue and has as the single point of order the words from the Holy Bible. Instead, the dialogue knows a much higher plate of meanings and approaches, in regard to different functions of language and also to context of pluralism, industrialization and globalization. James H. Kroeger said:

„Holding dialogue and proclamation in a harmonious, fruitful tension is a delicate balancing act (...) Evangelizers through prayer and the Eucharist will be able to draw the grace of discernment, to be able to read the signs of the Spirit's presence and to recognize the favorable time and right manner of proclaiming Jesus Christ”⁵.

Gheorghe Petraru asserts: “postmodernity sustains equality of religions, their source in human mind and not in transcendent”⁶. Semblable, this kind of thesis would be in favor of dialogue, which would take place from equal position. But it complicates things. By promoting so called “inclusive language” all forms of respect for Revelation is revitalized, sustaining the idea that religion has its origin in human mind and not in God's loving action of discovering Himself, for world redemption.

⁴ N. Achimescu, *Religii în dialog*, (Iași: Trinitas, 2006), pp. 27-28.

⁵ J. H. Kroeger, MM, *Living Mission - Challenges in Evangelization Today*, (New York: Orbis Books Maryknoll and Claretian Publications, Quezon City, Philippines, 1994), p. 15.

⁶ Gh. Petraru, *Teologie fundamentală și misionară. Ecumenism*, (Iași: Editura Performantica, 2006), p. 231.

Even today the dialogue with non-Christian religions must be based on three pillars: liberty, responsibility and competency⁷. If any of these conditions are not met we won't have a real and meaningful dialogue. The cancelation of liberty would presume the forced imposing of some principles, in this case we can't talk about a dialogue since suppressing the will of alterity transforms it into a monologue. The responsibility is absolutely necessary since its purposes give the dialogue the force of an action of major importance. And the competences are defined in the way the dialogue is received: the higher the diversity is, the greater the results are.

As Joseph Masson said "to have a dialogue means to recognize and respect the others values (...) because the first phase of the dialogue is the exchange of information"⁸. Of course this way a lot of useful missionary resources, from rich palette of cultural-religious traditions, are discovered and often appears the idea of reciprocal enrichment of the dialogue partners⁹.

There is obviously a time of mutual knowing and of current tapping, a way which opens the second level of the dialogue in which it tries to appropriate the common points, with the purpose to turn them to advantage: studying, confession, and even cultic life (prayer)¹⁰, in so far as the opinions coincide or are very similar, so it won't create irreducible contradictions.

Only like this the premises for experimenting the third phase of the dialogue, which consists of recognition and respect for those differential elements that, practically, marks the identity of each partner, is created¹¹. It's a delicate moment because many of the differences are on antagonist, irreducible positions,

⁷ J. Masson, *La missione continua*, (Bologna: EMI, 1975), p. 37.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

⁹ A. Bellagamba, *Mission and Ministry in the Global Church*, (New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1992), p. 39.

¹⁰ J. Masson, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

that rather imposes the properly debate of the opponents, than the understanding and tolerance. "Admittedly the recognition of the difference is one of the most difficult problems in dialogue"¹², shows Michael Barnes. Then the suspicion of an abdication from his own values could appear as well as the betrayed of dialogue's missionary role, that should have separate the truths from the untruths, leading without any doubts to declaring a winner and a loser. But, such a version would lead to an annulment of the core of the dialogue, changing it into a monolog and even more would be irremediable compromised because to destroy one of its fundamental elements: the liberty.

And then we ask the question: shall we stop here? So shall we let those who oppose any kind of dialogue, ecumenism or interreligious to glow, justifying that it's a loss of time? At first sight, analyzing the status of the third phase of the dialogue when you can understand your discussion partner and respect his characteristically notes of faith which are unacceptable for you, it seems that there is nothing else to do.

This, although, is a superficial human thinking, without recognizing the most efficient weapon of the mission: the power of God. And, as God works through people (Phil. 2, 13), the one called to lead the missionary wind, with actual results on preaching and conversion, is the "life's testimonials". Beyond the words, the endless dialogues, the exchange of opinions or lines, the only thing that could generate an earthquake of conscience is the personal example.

The religious dialogue must be sincere and diplomatic¹³. Must be done with friendship, offering the chances to a reciprocal accomplice to those common values or possible to assimilate.

¹² M. Barnes, *Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism: Religions in Conversation*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 80.

¹³ *It is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak - Ecclesiastes 3, 7*. Sometimes, silence can say more than thousand words.

That's why it's important that the sent messages to have a practice purpose. The doctrinal speeches must be done with clearness, directly, with the awake, permanent and missionary consciousness of the Christian preacher. A good understanding of these shows a harmonious knitting of the theological themes with the scientific ones, to outline a good relation between the science and the theology. It's important, how prof. Adam Wolanin says, that the Christian missionary, consistent to the evangelic principles, to don't sacrifice their own religion for some false interests to a false dialogue¹⁴, in other words not accepting any compromise.

Another necessary condition is the continue report of the dialogue promoters to this' kind of reception by the most, by the simple people. The presence in the middle of the people¹⁵ assumes the correct information, double directions; the public remembering of the dialogue and its results, and the permanent taking over of the public receptivity to the done ones. "Dialogue between religions can promote cooperation in society and better mutual understanding and respect among people"¹⁶- as cardinal Arinze shows. It's natural: a better knowing between the separate ones of different opinions lead to a better understanding, to the public benefit.

In the end the interreligious dialogue must be responsible and aware of the dangers that lurk it: misunderstanding, insincerity, self-sufficiency, religious indifference, skepticism, aggressiveness, insecurity, disbelief, suspicion and fear. All these situations are caused, in the first time by disbelief, many people consider themselves being versant even specialist regarding

¹⁴ A. Wolanin, S.J., *Teologia della missione. Testo con note*, edizione riveduta e ampliata, ad uso degli studenti, (Roma Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2000), p. 319.

¹⁵ J. Masson, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁶ F. Arinze, *The Church in Dialogue. Walking with Other Religions*, (San Francisco Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 13.

different religions but they are totally lack by any religious experience. On the other hand another dangerous cause is the religious extremism: the fundamentalism with all his aspects is very destructive to any kind of dialogue. When the communication is done truculent, the result is absolutely zero.

When some religious leaders are not very sure if their preaches are true, they prefer to cancel from the beginning any dialog implication, being afraid not to compromise themselves. Also those who don't know the theological language or don't own the dexterity to speak different languages, prefer to abstain from the religious dialogue. Unfortunately we know very well where the misapprehension or a wrong translation led in the church's history.

Unfortunately, the postmodernity brought an unprecedented recrudescence of the religious fundamentalism on the globe. The dialogue with the religious groups which belong to this phenomenon is difficult, without getting over the primary phases of the mutual knowing. To understand the complexity of these problems asked by this one, in the actual context, it is necessary to define some essential coordinates. First of all we can see the fanatic protection of one's interpretation of the Revelation's sources: biased biblical exegeses, obsolete canonic formulations, but respected with rigor.

Some particular dogmatic formulations have priority even in front of some universally recognize dogmas or before the biblical canonic texts. Return in the past, in the biblical apostolic ages or in the years of glory of Christianity is requested. Subtle, we can also notice here an attempt to evade from the postmodern technicism's fykes, generating apocalyptic chills. In fact, as Arij A. Roest Crolius, S.J. showed, we have to deal with the rejection of any means of mediating between history and culture¹⁷. Therefore the monolithic

¹⁷ A. A. R. Crolius, S.J., *Interreligious Dialogue: Can Be Sincere?*, in: *Inculturation*, nr. XX, Roma, 1999, pp. 61-71.

cohesion of the members of the respective groups, towards which develop a dependency feeling. And towards the interreligious dialogue they develop a terrifying fear fed by the motivation that this kind of communication would be a sign of weakness.

Anthony Bellagamba specifies that one of the interreligious dialogue's purposes is "to be able to discern together the signs of God's times"¹⁸. This way, by recognizing the divine intervention in history, like iconomic plan, the asperities produced by the own interpretation of the meaning of the time passing, which is often abstractedly from God's Divine implication, can be easily surpassed.

Historical data perception offers different views regarding the identity of the religious groups; that's why the interreligious dialogue implies a balanced position from the beginning towards these dates. Undertaking some of the past's errors is a progressive decision: though just it is difficult to do because sometimes it shakes from the ground traditional edifices previously considered untouchable. In the missionary plan, the chances of the preaching grow proportionally with clearing up every aspect that generated controversies or debates.

The high-tech contemporary society is saturated with information; in a selective and often manipulated way it looks to suppress any attempt of the religious facts to dominate the human placed at the top of the social pyramid, a victim of his self-sufficient state. That's why the religions are hit, bluntly, random, and the only arguments at reach of the aggressors are those related to the historical facts themselves. The fundamental error of this kind of perception is juggling the history through the eyes of the present, without having any means to report events analysis in the real context that we took place. Each belief subsists in the virtue of its own anamnetic.

¹⁸ A. Bellagamba, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

But what happens when the perception of a historical data is different or even opposed? In this case, according to the specialist, “a condition for progress in the art of dialogue is the capacity to see things from the point of view of the other”¹⁹.

Though there are different views on the historical facts per se, the purpose of the interreligious dialogue is that to determine everybody to discover God’s intervention in history, His real presence, divine providence, both on the global level and for each man. To understand the fact that: “God acts in the whole universe and in every single corner of our planet”²⁰.

It’s a lot of talking about coexistence and proexistence, in the contemporary missiology. The terms define the best the interaction between cultures and religions, which are hardly established to the leaders’ level and spontaneously between the simple believers. Just this spontaneous communication between the apparently separated ones is very interesting and gives testimony about the dialogue’s concrete results: most of them peaceful coexist²¹, or even they experience aspects of the existence given to the others (proexistence) while certain religious leaders swell these good relationships, pure human reasons, most of the time mercantile.

2 Chances for Mission

When the religious dialogue is correctly deployed, after some preset rules, it confers differed chances to the church. First time as the cardinal Arinze said: “There is dialogue of life in which people of different religious persuasions live together and enrich one another through faith full practice of the values of

¹⁹ A. A. R. Crollius, S.J., *op. cit.*, pp. 61-71.

²⁰ A. Bellagamba, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

²¹ J. Masson, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

their various religions”²². For a Christian, all the doctrinal elements, moral or civic, which define other religions, fade in front of those Christians: no other religion announces The Son’s sacrifice of God Incarnate, to raise the human race, through resurrection into Gods race, there isn’t a more evaluated moral except that one that is contained in the love behest unto God and the others, it can’t be a richer cult full of meanings except that one which culminates with the Eucharistic feast, through which the communion with Jesus fulfills, mysterious from this life.

That’s why the missiologist Augustine Kanjamala writes: “the deepest aspect of dialogue is sharing the religious experience of one another in an atmosphere of prayer and contemplation and a common search for ultimate truth”²³.

According to the specialists, the interreligious dialogue should start from the Holy Trinity dogma, an example of perihoretic communion and of shared endless love, in the condition of endless dialogue, potentate in the world’s relationships. Father creates the man from love then gives His Son to the humanity to bring the salvation from death and evil. “In a soteriocentric approach to missionary activity, missionaries experience the Divine Word in Jesus to be a focal part of a larger, liberating conversation of God with humanity”²⁴. The Holy Spirit updates and keeps permanently the work of Divine grace²⁵.

Regarding the actual results of the Spirit in the world, a balanced agreement can be achieved only by acquiring the

²² F. Arinze, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²³ A. Kanjamala, *Unity and Universality as a Goal of Interreligious Dialogue*, in: Leonardo N. Mercado, James J. Knight (eds), *Mission and Dialogue. Theory and Practice*, (Asia-Pacific Missiological Series, No.1, Manila, Rep. of. Philippines: Divine Word Publications, 1989), p. 183.

²⁴ P. Knitter, *Missionary Activity in a Theocentric – Soteriocentric Approach to Dialogue*, in: Leonardo N. Mercado, James J. Knight (eds), *Mission and Dialogue. Theory and Practice*, p. 211.

²⁵ F. Arinze, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

missionary meanings of uncultured, as an adaptation process of the faith's speech to the specific manifestation of local cultures. "In interfaith dialogue, as well as in the inculturation process, the missionary, theologian, or Christian community and the Spirit act as partners"²⁶. So it's a teandric work as it can be seen: "There is always collaboration among these agents; the Holy Spirit is the internal agent, guiding the efforts of the external agents of evangelization. The techniques and human efforts toward inculturation and dialogue are fruitful due to the discreet action of the Spirit; also, it is the Spirit alone who changes people's hearts, minds, and attitudes (*metanoia*) so that true inculturation and open dialogue can succeed"²⁷.

Starting from the Holy Trinity truth, it goes through the correct and efficient interreligious to the real understanding and the confessional pluralism definition. Besides the chances offered by the institutionalization of religious groups from a certain territory, to become viable partners of the central and local administration, the pluralism's certitude is of responsibility, regarding the necessity of creating a relational setting based on respectful principle mutual and good understanding.

The communication need between cults and religions is developed by the society precisions nihilist, challenged, and anti-traditional which determines common stands, as far as the counteraction of the anti-religious phenomenon is wanted. The churches' growth should not be understand like a planting of churches one in spite of the other, but as all religions together in spite of social anarchy of secularization, atheism, new age trends, of violent ideologies, of occultism. In one of the newest and most elaborated books of analysis of the Christian postmodernity interaction Carmelo Dotolo uses a collocation

²⁶ J. H. Kroeger, MM, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

for all these challenges: "the seduction of sacred plurality"²⁸. The unity of some applied desiderates cannot disturb the identity of each person, as James H. Kroeger: "Dialogue does not mean the abandonment of one's religious convictions. On the contrary, one enters dialogue precisely as a religious person; the sincerity of interreligious dialogue requires that each enters into it with the integrity of his or her own faith"²⁹.

Even if there are enough reticence regarding interreligious collaborations, because of obvious doctrinaire, spiritual of ritual differences, there can be identified different ways of common expression for the orientation of the love for our neighbor and for the one's in need. The social lane it truly is the ideal place for expressing ideas of unity in beliefs, as the Love of God and fellow humans is a feeling that surpasses any barriers of doctrinaire misunderstanding.

The living proof, accomplished and livelong of this love, showed as a supreme sacrifice for human and cosmos, is Jesus, Son of Incarnate God, that who cures and furbishes up everything through his revival. However, as rev. prof. Mihai Himcinschi warns: "the dialogue cannot solve all the moral and politic conflicts which appear in a pluralist society. (...) He creates the necessary environment, where the citizens and the communities meet in a public domain"³⁰.

So we shouldn't expect to get any miraculous and triumphant results, but it's rather necessary to have a correct position of the interreligious dialogue role nowadays.

²⁸ C. Dotolo, *Un cristianesimo possibile. Tra postmodernità e ricerca religiosa*, (Brescia: Editrice Queriniana, 2007), p. 135.

²⁹ J. H. Kroeger, *MM, op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁰ M. Himcinschi, *Biserica în societate. Aspecte misionare ale Bisericii în societatea actuală*, (Alba Iulia: Editura Reîntregirea, 2006), p. 133.

3 Perspectives

Many types of interreligious dialogue can be developed, grouped both after the implicated persons categories, and after the discussions context.

Not only the theology specialists are the protagonists of such a dialogue; it takes place on different social lanes. Simple people interact in their daily life, the fact they live together – having different religious persuasion - it determines most of them to enrich each other through knowing and good understanding of the religious different experiences. Being good neighbors determines them to share each other joys and sorrows and to stay together in front of their lives problems. They often tell one other spiritual experiences and even attend together certain prayers, although the risk of some cleavages caused by some, still pretty frequent, proselytism maneuvers, is very high.

The factors implicated in social services can experiment the way in which different religions look at human suffering and brotherly help, and also at the expressing of the justice and social freedom ideas. There is a possibility to have common projects regarding that. Since 1989 rev. prof. Ion Bria signaled that one of the human problems is “the lack of completion towards the human community in general that is still the common ground of all religion preaching”³¹.

In cultural and academic circles can be said that dialogue is at home: there are no barriers or balks in front of communication that take place with the decency and sobriety imposed by academic rigors. Even the monastic environment can be the background for an interesting interreligious dialogue: it is very well known by the missiologists the productive collaboration between the catholic and Buddhist monks.

In 1979 fifty Japanese monks, disciples of Zen Buddhism experienced a few weeks of monastic life in some catholic

³¹ I. Bria, *Destinul Ortodoxiei*, (București: EIBMBOR, 1989), pp. 182-183.

monasteries in Europe, and in 1983 twenty Benedictine monks from Europe went to live for a month in Buddhist temples in Japan.

A very recently and more and more way of the religious dialogue is the one which takes place in virtual space. By commenting certain news or answering to different preset topics, lots of anonymous people exchange masterly lines, on different forums that are absolutely toxically for the users and visitors. The obviously manipulation, the defamation, the lying, the hatred and licentious language are just a few serious deviation from the rules of conduct for a civilized dialogue that can be seen on this forums.

In postmodernity, as we have seen, different alternative versions of reality and various ways of life are promoted. This absolute tolerance offers the dialogue some unthinkable chances to identify and successfully by pass the demonical traps laid down in front of the contemporary human because the freedom of speech together with the power of the individual example are the key for waking up the society from the morally and spiritual nonchalance.