

Catholic Renewal Movements and Dialogue

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Abstract: *The birth and growth of renewal movements in the Catholic Church over the last 75 years is linked with Vatican II. In the same period, comparable movements have also sprouted in the Abrahamic and Eastern religious traditions. In addition to fostering renewed commitment within their respective communities, the emergence of such movements has also led to dynamic interreligious dialogue, fostering collaboration on global issues like peace, disarmament and ecology.*

The presentations by Fabio Petito and Adnane Mokrani were accompanied by specific historical developments. I will refer to the growth within the Catholic Church of

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renewal movements that originated immediately before or after the Second Vatican Council. These developments were an unexpected change within the Catholic world. They were, however, prepared, accompanied, and fostered by several elements. The first element is the theological reflection before, during, and after the Second Vatican Council. The second element includes the important papal messages, documents, and prophetic gestures from those of Pope John XXIII up to and including those of Pope Francis in our time, as well as the official statements and concrete initiatives and projects organized by the church in the last fifty years. These phenomena marked a new ecclesiological understanding that is deeply rooted in a communitarian dimension. Along with this, over the past half a century, some of these religious renewal movements have become important players in the interreligious field.

Even more interesting is the fact that this phenomenon is not restricted to the Catholic Church or even to Christianity. A similar process of renewal has taken place simultaneously within other religions, too, including Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Alongside obvious differences, there are also remarkable points of similarity and convergence. Moreover, they incorporated the new wind of renewal into their own religious traditions and, at the same time, they worked to foster dialogue between men and women of different religions. Their role is very much part of the processes mentioned by the other speakers. These renewal movements, in fact, are protagonists, in their own way, of the return of religion to public life. This series of phenomena and these developments and their impact on society at large have now drawn the attention of scholars: theologians above all, but also political scientists and sociologists of religion. I limit myself to a couple of these considerations.

On the one hand, from the viewpoint of the theology of religions, some scholars speak of a new axial age, similar to the one Jaspers described in relation to the history of religions between the seventh and the third centuries BCE, a period when prophets or founders of religions were born in different parts of the world: Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Lao Tze and Confucius, Socrates and Plato. In this connection, the Italian theologian Piero Coda, current president of Sophia University Institute, while highlighting the contribution of these movements to the process of encounter among the faithful of different religious traditions, writes:

It seems to us that we are witnessing something quite new today, something which in the future might be regarded as the beginning of a new age. The illuminating action of the Holy Spirit was, of course, always present in various ways in history. Today, this action is pushing, on the basis of previous history, toward an important new step. Religious identities, and especially those born of the trunk of Abrahamic monotheism, are entering into a new relationship among themselves. They are moving from an exclusivist interpretation of God's revelation (God revealed Godself to us, excluding the others) to a new though timid relationship (the God who is for me is also for the others, precisely because he is the only God).¹

On the other hand, we find Thomas Banchoff, who argues from a more typically sociological perspective that:

1. Piero Coda, *Il Logos e il nulla: Trinità, religioni, mistica* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 2003), 124.

religions may have a transformative effect on individuals and communities and no doubt encounter one another within an increasingly global civil society. . . . Dialogue . . . is not solely or even primarily about theological matters. It involves members of different religious communities speaking out of their own traditions in an effort to better understand and more effectively navigate inevitable cultural, ethical, and political differences. Dialogue can have a strategic dimension; it can serve to preserve and extend the size of one's own community. But its primary aims are not to prevail over the other but to reduce conflict and promote understanding and cooperation across issues of common concern.²

From a broader perspective, these communities can be widely defined as nongovernmental actors representing a specific tradition that has, at the same time, a relationship with actors of other states or international organizations. They are often simply defined as movements or phenomena that have as their main target and concern not only (or even always) religion but also peace, disarmament, and ecology. Some of these communities have been instrumental in signing peace agreements among factions engaged in strife in Africa or Asia. Others are engaged in programs for peace formation in formal or informal education. They appear to be key agents in the processes of bringing masses together or introducing people of different cultures and religions and creating interfaith and interreligious encounter and dialogue. As mentioned, in the

2. Thomas Banchoff, "Interreligious Dialogue and International Relations," in *Re-thinking Religion and World Affairs*, ed. Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred Stepan, and Monica Duffy Toft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 204–5.

complex and often confused present world situation, some observers are beginning to take notice of the role these new realities are playing. They work as aggregating factors of a new social activity of the church and religious movements of all religious traditions. They succeed as catalyzing elements much more than do lay institutions.

At the very root of the experience of Sophia, there is one of these realities: the Focolare Movement, which is active in all the fields we have mentioned above, particularly in encountering people of different cultures and religions and in offering models of dialogue, interaction, and integration for peacebuilding and conflict prevention. The experience of the Focolare Movement has been, for long years, at the grass-roots level. It is enough to recall the experience of Catholics and Muslims in Algeria, which has progressed through dialogue to actually living together.³ The same can be said for the relationship between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists in Thailand and in Japan, with Muslims in Eastern Europe, especially in Macedonia (between Macedonian Christian-Orthodox and Albanian Muslims), and in the United States, between African American Muslims and Christians. In Italy, too, there have been and are several experiences on the ground that favor not only dialogue but also the integration of entire communities arriving via new waves of migration.

All these grassroots experiences, which present a great variety of models of development and results, provide precious material for studying these phenomena and the role the spiritual and religious dimension has played in the respective processes. Sophia

3. Roberto Catalano, "Christian-Muslim Dialogue: The Experience of Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement," *Encounter* 385 (May 2013): 5–6.

offers a precious think tank where students can undertake such reflection via a specific course: Theology and Praxis of Interreligious Dialogue. More recently a group of scholars from different disciplines—including theology, history, political science, and interfaith dialogue—have initiated wider research that is part of the project we present today, Sophia Global Studies. The most recent is the Wings of Unity project, which was initiated by Sophia and a group of Shi'a thinkers and scholars and aims to study the unity of God and in God. Particularly successful was the Summer School held last August, which numbered about forty students, both Christian and Shi'a. These projects derive from different agents within the Focolare Movement. Sophia offers the platform and the intellectual think-tank where reflection can be carried out. The Center for Interreligious Dialogue of the Focolare Movement, for its part, offers the patrimony of experiences that can serve as the object of this reflection and a wide network for promoting this reflection and the study of the above-mentioned phenomena. This work adds a new interdisciplinary dimension to the one that is more typical of Sophia and the disciplines offered here.

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a classic in the history of the Focolare in dialogue with other religions. Before earning a doctorate in Theology of Religions from the Urbaniana University, he was actively involved in interreligious dialogue in India for 28 years, organizing several symposia and events in India and in Rome between Hindus and Christians.