

Revealed Religion's Vital Contribution to the Epoch-Making Newness of a Culture of Unity

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Abstract: *The author writes: "In memory of Bishop Pietro Rossano, that unforgettable and wise teacher in the past and in the present, about dialogue among religions, this article offers the text of a lecture titled 'Unity of God, Unity in God.' The lecture was part of a course organized by Sophia University Institute in Loppiano and the Islamic Centre of England in London with twenty Catholic university students and an equal number of Muslims. It was held at Tonadico (Trent) in September 2017. Among other things, I was inspired by the following affirmation of Bishop Rossano; it is like the hidden thread running through the*

thought I develop here. what writes that we need to express "the interpersonal relationship peculiar to the Christian faith, a relationship inviting subjects into a new relationship with God and their brothers or sisters in a form transcending the orbit of all religions because it is anchored in the mystery of the uni-triune God which humanity shares in Jesus Christ. Far from destroying the preceding religious heritage, this new rapport purifies and expands this heritage to formerly unknown horizons" (Il problema teologico delle religioni, Ed. Paoline, 1975, 46).

1. Pope Francis emphasizes that we are not merely living an epoch of great change today but a change of epoch itself. Looking at things phenomenologically, from the standpoint of the history of the relationship among religions, and trying to discern the "signs of the times" in the light of Christian faith, it is possible to conclude that it is a matter of a *kairos*, using New Testament terminology. In other words, we are dealing with a moment in which God enters our history in a precise and careful way with the Holy Spirit's action. If it is true that he is always present in fact, it is just as true that he makes himself present and active more intensely in some moments, and he summons and consults with us, offering special gifts so that humanity can move decisively toward him.

Various signs converge today, and together they tell us that we are living in a time when humanity is able to grasp for the first time ever that unity on a universal level is not merely a utopia; it is not beyond the realm of possibility. It is not a warlike venture of conquest and absolutist assimilation of the other, as often happened in the past. It is proposed instead as the realistic challenge to harmonize diversity in freedom as demanded by the historical

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conditions that human development has reached. It is an invitation for the human conscience to answer responsibly.

We see an irrepressible movement toward the creation of a single worldwide market on the economic level, for example. Of course, we have to state firmly that such a process is unacceptable in the modalities it has assumed because it favors certain sections of the population and some countries at the expense of others, generating inequality and marginalization. Nevertheless, the economic network is becoming worldwide. The same is true of the communications network made functional by extraordinary technological developments which make viable hitherto impossible experiences of exchange .

But the understanding and management of unity on a political level (where “politics” is meant in the higher sense of management of the “cosmopolis” or so-called global city) is evidently not up to the challenge in this situation where the economy and technology are breaking into uncharted territory. On the contrary! We seem to be missing a culture capable of imagining and organizing the unity made available by technological and economic achievements in line with justice, universal brotherhood and sisterhood, and the common good.

We have to admit it: We lack a culture that thinks and builds a unity that can bring the riches of peoples, cultures, and religious traditions into relationship in a shared space for exchanging respective gifts with reciprocal respect. This is so much the case that true politics is glaringly absent in our times, tending to become something like a trailer towed by the economy and technology, unable to manage this new stage in history with vision and competence.

This is the point! We do not have a political culture of unity today, most of all because a spirit of unity is missing. In fact, an

effective and incisive political culture of unity is possible only where there is a soul-giving thrust, prophecy, and concreteness to its projects. In facing this challenge, religions are called to be on the front lines. It is up to them to offer a new spirit of unity from God, making it available and usable for everyone.

Fortunately, something important is happening in the world of religions. Let us take only the last fifty years as a reference point. For the Catholic Church, I am thinking of the journey leading from the Second Vatican Council to the 1986 Religions’s World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi. Something has happened—indeed, something is happening—that historians in upcoming centuries will probably read as an unprecedented and decisive event: Religions are beginning to encounter one another. As they strive to leave distrust and conflict behind, they take up dialogue, collaborating together for the human family’s progress. Of course, there are conflicts, even bitter ones. There are still strong affirmations of identity. There is resistance and even tragic manifestations of fundamentalism. Nothing is to be taken for granted.

Nonetheless, an insightful step ahead is being taken. Essentially, this step consists in the fact that today it is possible and even necessary for different religions to meet and enter into dialogue. Precisely in this way, in my view, religions are called to impart a breath of something new to the cultural, social, political, and economic quest to build this family together.

This is so much the case that we could reconsider in a new way today what the philosopher Karl Jaspers wrote about the history of religions and civilizations to describe what we are living (the historian of civilizations, Arnold Toynbee, affirmed something similar). Jaspers wrote that a great “axial age” in human history occurred when the great religious identities were formed almost at

the same time. The Abrahamic identity in the Middle East, with the revelation of the one and only God, and the religious traditions that subsequently developed from this came into existence. From this identity, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam came to be. Then there was the tradition born from the Buddha in India spreading into China and then Japan. There was Zoroaster's religion in Persia and Confucius's and Lao Tzu's in China.

Each of these is an experience that is at its heart a religious experience. They cast seeds of life and spirituality into the furrows of history. Different civilizations took form from these—the Indian, Chinese, Persian, and Jewish, and then the Christian and Islamic ones. This is correctly considered a “first axial age.” It is characterized by the fact that God is at the origin of each of these religious experiences. But each promoted a distinct peculiar cultural and social identity. It is even possible to speak in this case of a “centrifugal” force marking history. God is certainly the root, but when civilizations opened up as different branches of a single tree in history, they opened out separately, even opposing one another.

We see a decisive change in perspective today: *The original “centrifugal” movement is giving way to a “centripetal” push.* The different and already well-defined religious identities now look one another in the face and recognize that they can walk together. A second axial age in humanity's religious history is on the horizon, holding the promise of something new. If the force animating religions becomes centripetal instead of centrifugal—without forcing uniformity and violently erasing differences but instead giving life to a rainbow displaying the colors of light—then it becomes possible to give a soul to that cultural and political commitment that is working and providing for unity as a realistic concrete providential possibility in history in an array of differences.

So this is the principle of this “second axial age.” God is not only the source of the different religious identities, but he urges them on to recognize one another reciprocally so that he himself can be more and more present in their peaceful encounter. This is what is new in our time. We have to be grateful and aware of this change, which presents itself as a gift for everyone. But we have to wonder what it means. What is God doing in our hearts? What does God want us to do? We can better correspond to God's will if we understand these things. I will quickly touch upon three points in response to these questions. Living unity today means contemplating God with a new outlook; it means living our reciprocal relationships in a new form; it means transforming global society with a new leaven.

2. First of all, *contemplating God in a new way*: that One God alone, in whom we believe—both as Christians and as Muslims in our case. God is the One, the source, the goal, and the way for us to be one. God is the source because everything comes from him; everything carries his mark; everything manifests his will of love and mercy. God is the goal because we are all called to be one in him, and this is what we will be fully in Paradise with him for eternity. And finally, God is the way, the One guiding us along the road to unity, its living principle.

Considering all this, it seems evident to me that the new axial age has been inaugurated in human history, pushing us to contemplate God from within our traditions undoubtedly but with a new outlook and a new heart. We can discern three great steps in human history in the journey of contemplation of God's unity and in God, of everything that is.

In the first step God's unity was grasped as the source and destiny of human history beyond everything, beyond creation

and history. And there need be no doubt about God's absolute transcendence, God's otherness with respect to creation, God's holiness. But precisely because God's unity was understood to be beyond everything, it was understood to be so ineffable and mysterious that it required extinguishing our own identities so that they would be lost like a drop in the ocean's immensity. But this means not being able to express God's unity in history and in our relationships, in fact, because each person is called to be extinguished in God's mystery and then possibly to return into history, but only to bear witness to the fact that each one is called to be extinguished in God and uprooted from their history. So it is an understanding of unity as an ineffable indicator of something totally beyond human possibilities, a destiny beyond anything we might contribute for its achievement.

But there is a second step, which is God's immense gift entering into human history through the revelation to Abraham and his successors—in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is the gift that God alone can fashion by revealing himself. At the same time, this revelation certainly respects his sanctity, absoluteness, and transcendence. Yes, God speaks; God reveals Godself! The revealed religions are a decisive new step in human history. Not that the earlier step is wiped out; it ultimately finds its hidden, awaited, desired meaning instead in just this way. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have the extraordinary gift of preserving and transmitting God's unity to humanity, the One God revealing Godself. It is the light illuminating and giving form to the unity of humanity and the world. God's unity is shown to be the principle of the human family's unity. Human history is made to grow toward its fullness as God's unity is revealed. It is an epochal passage. It is no longer the unity of fusion that extinguishes the identity of what is created

as it is fused with the mysterious ineffable unity of the Divine; but it is the unity of relationship. God enters into relationship with us, with the human family, and invites us to build relationships of justice and truth among us. It is unity as an ideal and as an ethical commitment to achieve just, true relationships among human beings and among peoples. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are called to be the ferment of this unity in history. In the past they tried to do it in an agonizingly difficult way, but now the principle of ethical unity has become the leaven of human history, even beyond the visible boundaries of these religions.

Two questions still remain. The first is that each of these religions—the revealed religions—are understood to have the capacity and obligation to express God's unity in history, starting from themselves alone. And this is where a temptation lies hidden. Each religion can be tempted to see unity starting from itself alone, not starting from God, who is the one, gifting humanity with unity. That is why, for example, Christianity (I take this example because it is my religious tradition) thinks: I must spread my identity to include everyone; I must absorb everyone inside of myself. The jump made here did not always deserve blame; it stemmed from a mistaken perspective, the identification of only one of these instruments, only one of these different religions, with that ideal of unity that God gave and that is manifested through the sign and instrument of the different religions, in a way that is different for each of them. This would explain why each religion feels urged to proselytize, in other words, to encompass the other within itself. When this happens, each religion makes itself absolute.

This is where part of modern culture acquires the conviction, which is certainly false, but has some historical basis, that sees monotheism (the revealed religions' affirmation of God's unity) as

itself linked with intolerance. It is a historiographical theoretical thesis that is false in itself, but instead of giving the image of God's unity, the image often offered by the different religions provoked this tragic misunderstanding through the centuries. This is the first question that remains open. We can give a precise answer by showing what is new today and by describing the second axial age that invites us to become protagonists; it is the age of encounter and collaboration among the monotheistic religions.

The following is the second issue that is still open—the perception, at least in the deeper experiences stemming from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, that the kind of ethical relationship stimulated by the revelation of the one God is not enough if it stays on the level of relations where persons and social realities remain external to one another. This is because if God is one, then how can my identity be in definitive contrast with another who also believes in the unity of that God revealed as one? A relationship of simple otherness is not enough. A mysticism of unity must be lived and experienced in history precisely because God's unity, with God's revelation, is meant to transform society, guiding it toward unity.

And this is the third step in contemplating God's unity and ultimately corresponds to the second axial age we are discussing. In our own epoch, religions are beginning to recognize one another reciprocally, as I was saying; they are becoming centripetal instead of centrifugal. So what is happening? We are urged to seek true unity in distinction with God and then with and through God, with one another. God's unity comes to be perceived as the principle of a real and mystical unity among us in this way. It is no longer a simple ethical relationship of recognition and respect among subjects who remain outside one another in such a way that each one stays in his or her own place. Instead it is the urge, in a

true encounter among us, to seize the mysterious but real unity God wants for us already within history, and not just in Paradise at the end of times. I think that this is the deep reality coming about in humanity's religious consciousness today.

For example, as a Christian how can I believe in One God if I do not approach believers in God from the other religions in dialogue? I cannot! I would not have even raised this question fifty years ago, when a gentlemen's agreement was the most one could hope for, when we struggled to replace intolerance with tolerance. But today this is no longer enough. Today we perceive the need for more. We know that we cannot go ahead alone—I along my way and you along yours. We have to do it together.

We have the grace to be pioneers on this path, a path that is undoubtedly difficult since it is uncharted but that builds the future realistically. In our religious traditions there are certainly those who say, "You're no longer a Christian—you are always with Muslims"; "You're no longer a Muslim—you are always with Christians." This is the inertial force of identity understood in an exclusive, absolutist sense. I am with you in reality, not despite the fact that I am a Christian but precisely because I am Christian; and you are with us precisely because you are a Muslim. In other words, it is because we believe in the God Who is One—I in accordance with my faith and you in accordance with yours—that we desire to encounter God's presence in the other. This is the spiritual religious ferment beginning to leaven human history. It is meant to become a credible realistic proposal even on an anthropological, cultural, and political level.

3. But how can this new path be lived? What does it imply about our experience and culture? The fact is this: a new form of

interpersonal relationships is being born from contemplation of God's unity, in the sense that our relationships are called to correspond to the unity being lived in God. God is in each human person's heart. And I do not only meet him in my own heart; I can encounter him also in another person's heart. He is the One connecting us, the "place" for real true unity among us. And this is because God is in each human person's heart since each human person is in God's heart. God loves each one; wants, creates, and accompanies each person. And so there is a reciprocity (given and wanted by God!) not only among us but also between God and us. We are in God and God is in us.

The unity of and in God is the principle of unity in distinction among us. Yes, unity is the principle of distinction! Unity is not reducing the other to oneself, as it was sometimes understood in the past, implying the uniformity and absolutization of one's own identity. No. The true unity of and from God makes it possible for someone to truly be him or herself only by being in the right relationship with the other. In true unity we reciprocally recognize one another because we understand that the identity and the otherness of the other correspond to his or her relationship with God.

That implies a conversion in our relationships. Before anything else, it implies transparency. I do not approach the other while holding a secret desire in my heart, that the other should become like me. Each one must discover what God wants from him or her, and I am one with the other if I respect his or her journey. We are transparent with one another because we want to be one in God, in accord with God's will, in the ways and times that God wants.

And this is a principle of social transformation as well, because the leaven of a new culture is disseminated within society where relationships of this kind are actualized. Interpersonal relationships

illuminated by contemplation of God's unity become something else, and so politics, economics, communications, art, and so on come to be illuminated, transformed, and shaped by this form of unity. A very real "cultural revolution," as Pope Francis calls it, happens as a result of this. How is it possible to bring this process ahead concretely?

- By enkindling living cells of this experience everywhere with love and multiplying them in the social body.
- By engendering communitarian experiences that make this reality visible, experiences that are meant to be not an innocuous utopia but a concrete experiment with this reality.
- By enabling the new generations to experience all of this, being educated together in other words, living a mystagogy together as an introduction to this reality in which the new generations are to be protagonists.

Cells, laboratories, new generations—all operate with the awareness that God is the One acting in this new step of human history. God is the One guiding our steps and together with us, God is the One accomplishing our journey according to God's will.

4. I am always struck anew by an image in the Book of Revelation, the last book of Christian Scripture, which ends with this vision: the new city coming down from God, life in peace and unity among all peoples together. It is not up to us to build a city reflecting God's unity; in the end, this new city comes down from God. We are incarnating something that will be given to us in the end! There will be no temple, nor sunlight nor moonlight in this

new city, God's gift, because God himself will be present in our midst. He already is now, but we cannot contemplate God yet with an unveiled face. We perceive God; we know that God is there; we thank God and we open ourselves to God with our whole heart. God still has to fully manifest the light of Unity forever.

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