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## ”With Sincere Reverence”: A Christological Perspective for the Interreligious Dialogue Envisioned by *Nostra Aetate*

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# ”With Sincere Reverence”: A Christological Perspective for the Interreligious Dialogue Envisioned by *Nostra Aetate*

Paolo Gamberini SJ

## Abstract

Theologians have a particular task to provide discernment when expressing in interreligious dialogue the Christological proclamation that Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life,” (Jn 14:6), in whom people may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself” (*Nostra Aetate*, §3). Therefore, there is a need to renew the spirit of the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which reminds us that the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in the other religions. The Church acknowledges with sincere reverence (“*sincera cum observantia*”) that the other often religions reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people.

In this article, I highlight three different moments in which this sincere reverence towards other religions may be realized. The first moment may be called methodological and refers to the Ignatian tradition of the *Spiritual Exercises*. I develop first of all the *praesupponendum* (presupposition) as an attitude of being able to listen to the religious experience of the other; then the *contemplatio ad amorem* (contemplation in attaining love), as awareness and recognition of the action of the Spirit: being able to distinguish the religious experience of God from its theoretical and practical interpretations; finally the *magis*, the continuing transcending of the religious conscience in reaching out God: *Deus semper maior* (God is always greater).

The second moment of my paper is more theoretical. I deal with the question of Truth within the interreligious dialogue and how God’s ineffable transcendence and otherness have been revealed in this Jesus of Nazareth; “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (Jn 1:18). The humanity of God, Jesus’ particularity, is not a limitation for interreligious dialogue, but constitutes an adequate perspective for determining the universality of Jesus Christ.

The third moment considers the practical dimension of the dialogue. I relate the inner otherness of God (Trinity) with God’s becoming other than himself (Incarnation), showing how the evangelical praxis of the believer, who makes himself everything for everybody, is able in the praxis, more than in theory, to sustain the eschatological tension between the already and not yet that is characteristic of interreligious dialogue.

**KEYWORDS:** Religions; Jesus Christ; Tolerance; Truth; Catholic church; Dialogue; Incarnation; God; Trinity; Revelation; Identity; Otherness; Word

# STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

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## “‘With Sincere Reverence’: A Christological Perspective for the Interreligious Dialogue Envisioned by *Nostra Aetate*”

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The ethnical and cultural situation in Italy as well as in many European countries has radically changed in recent years. The increase of immigration, especially from North Africa and from Asia, is slowly changing the way Europeans think about their own religious and cultural identity.

The arrival of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs challenges who we are as Catholics. Islam has become the second largest religion in Italy. In his speech to the city in the year 2000, the former Archbishop of Bologna, Giacomo Biffi, said that either Europe will become Christian again or else it will become Muslim.<sup>1</sup> The Cardinal was also targeting the *nihilistic* and *pluralistic* culture which will not be able to face the ideological attack of Islam. This is why the Catholic Church has tried to have the continent's Christian roots acknowledged in the European Constitution, but as we know without success.

Facing not only the religious expansion of Islam and of other religions, but also preoccupied by the threat of terrorist fundamentalism, many Catholics are tempted to defend their identity by suspecting any kind of pluralistic attitude in dealing with the present situation. They affirm themselves by excluding anyone who is different ethnically and religiously. They claim themselves by removing others.

Therefore, there is a need for renewing the spirit of the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (NA), which reminds us that the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in the other religions. The Church acknowledges "with sincere reverence" (*sincera cum observantia*) that the other religions reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all humanity. The 1974 Guidelines for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4 – prepared by the

<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Giacomo Biffi, "La città di San Petronio nel III Millennio," // *Regno-documenti*, 17 (2000): 551.

Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews – states that the Church must always promote better mutual understanding to overcome the reciprocal ignorance and the frequent confrontations among people of different beliefs.

Theologians have a particular task in providing discernment, in order to inform interreligious dialogue with the Christological proclamation that Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6), in whom people may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself" (NA, §2).

I will highlight three different moments in which this "sincere reverence" towards other religions may be realized. The *first* moment may be called *methodological* and will refer to the Ignatian tradition of the *Spiritual Exercises*. I will develop first of all the *praesupponendum* (presupposition) as an attitude of being able to listen to the religious experience of the other; then the *contemplatio ad amorem* (contemplation in attaining love) as the awareness and recognition of the action of the Spirit: being able to distinguish the religious experience of God from its theoretical and practical interpretations; and finally the *magis*, the continuing transcending of the religious conscience in reaching out to God: *Deus semper maior* (God is always greater).

The second moment of my paper will be more *theoretical*. I will deal with the question of Truth within interreligious dialogue and how God's ineffable transcendence and otherness have been revealed in *this* Jesus of Nazareth. "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known" (Jn 1:18). The humanity of God, Jesus' particularity, is not a limitation for the interreligious dialogue, but constitutes an adequate perspective for determining the universality of Jesus Christ.

The third moment considers the *practical* dimension of the dialogue. I will articulate the inner otherness of God (Trinity) with God's becoming other than Himself (Incarnation): I will show how the evangelical praxis of the believer, who makes himself everything for everybody, is able in the praxis, more than in theory, to sustain the eschatological tension between the *already and not yet*, which characterizes interreligious dialogue.

### 1. The *Methodological Moment*

St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote the book of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a guide on how to experience God and to make decisions in one's own life in a selfless way. At the beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises* St. Ignatius introduces some presuppositions (*praesupponendum*) which say that he who is giving the *Spiritual Exercises* should "be ready to save his neighbor's proposition than to condemn it. If he cannot save it, let him inquire how he means it; and if he means it badly, let him correct him with charity. If that is not enough, let him seek all the suitable means to bring him to mean it well, and save him."<sup>2</sup> When we apply this principle to interreligious dialogue it means that it is necessary to listen carefully to the religious experience of the other believers, trying more and more to assume the other's perspective instead of coercing the other into one's own viewpoint. "Listening is the first step in understanding. In listening we indicate both that we care about the other and also that we have something to learn from the other. It seems to me that religious humility mandates listening as a basic mode of being in an

interreligious context."<sup>3</sup> We may formulate the golden rule of interreligious dialogue in this way: "Try always to understand the others, as you would like to be understood."<sup>4</sup>

We need to listen to the Muslim as a Muslim, the Buddhist as a Buddhist. *Dialogue and Proclamation (DP)*, a May, 1991 document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), states that Christians must be prepared to learn and to receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions. Through this attentive listening and open attitude Christians "may be moved to give up ingrained prejudices, to revise preconceived ideas, and even sometimes to allow the understanding of their faith to be purified" (§49).<sup>5</sup>

In §235-§236 of the *Spiritual Exercises* we may find the second methodological principle for interreligious dialogue. Everyone is invited to acknowledge how God dwells, labors, and acts in all created things. That means that by giving up one's own preconceived ideas and by having receptive minds, as the PCID document affirms, Christians should recognize that God has "also manifested himself in some

<sup>2</sup> See David L. Fleming, SJ, *Saint Ignatius, The Spiritual Exercises: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* 6th ed. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991). See also J. THOMAS, *I Segreti dei Gesuiti. Gli Esercizi Spirituali* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> A. Goshen-Gottstein, "Judaism and Incarnational Theologies: Mapping out the Parameters of Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 39, No. 3-4 (June 2002): 23.

<sup>4</sup> M. Schulz, "Der Beitrag von Immanuel Levinas zum jüdisch-christlichen Dialog: Menschwerdung Gottes," *Münchener theologische Zeitschrift* 56 (2005): 152.

<sup>5</sup> Cf., "Much contemporary theological thinking is done precisely in dialogue with others. The purpose of such dialogue is twofold: first, to correct imbalances that stem from a false perception of the other or from excluding the other from one's horizons; and second, the encounter with the other furnishes us with new ways of perceiving and presenting our religious convictions. Ultimately, the encounter with the other fashions our own self-perception, as well as our religious understanding" (Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "Judaisms and Incarnational Theologies," 221).

way to the followers of other religious traditions" (§48).<sup>6</sup> The Spirit of God is *not only* at work in the religious life of *individual* believers, "but also in the religious traditions to which they belong" (§17). During the first interreligious meeting in Assisi on Oct. 27, 1986, and again in his speech to the Roman Curia in December of the same year, John Paul II declared that "every authentic prayer is moved by the Holy Spirit."<sup>7</sup> In one of his Wednesday catecheses, on Sept. 10, 1998, John Paul II remarked that "very often at the source of the variety of religions there are founders who realized in the Spirit a deep religious experience. This spiritual experience has been transferred into the doctrines, rites and teachings of the different religions."<sup>8</sup>

In order to perceive the Spirit at work within these religions it is necessary to go beyond the propositions and formulations of those to whom we listen. We need at this moment to pay attention to the eighth rule for the discernment of spirits of the Second Week. Ignatius Loyola distinguishes very carefully the starting moment of the spiritual consolation, in which the soul is touched by God himself, and the following moment of this experience. "For often in this second time, through one's own course of habits and the consequences of the concepts and judgements, or through the good spirit or through the bad, he forms various resolutions and opinions which are not given immediately by

<sup>6</sup> The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences declared in November 1986 that religions have the gift of an authentic experience of the self-communication of the divine Word and of the saving presence of the Holy Spirit. (Quoted in Congregazione Generale 34<sup>a</sup> della Compagnia di Gesù (1995), *Decreto V*, Roma 1996, 86). See J.-M. Biron, "La Compagnie de Jésus et le dialogue interreligieux," *Cahiers de Spiritualité Ignatienne* 110 (2004) : 97-111.

<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Paolo II, "Discorso ai cardinali, alla famiglia pontificia e alla curia e prelatura romana," *Il Regno-documenti* 32 (1987): 136.

<sup>8</sup> See *L'Osservatore Romano* (September 10, 1998).

God our Lord, and therefore they have need to be very well examined before entire credit is given them, or they are put into effect" (§336).

If we extend this eighth rule not only to individuals but to religions, then we need to distinguish between the written and oral traditions, kept in Sacred Scriptures and teachings, and the original self-communication of God received by the founders of these religions.<sup>9</sup> *Dialogue and Proclamation* (§30, §78) states that prayerful discernment and theological reflection is required in order to discern the presence of the Spirit within the doctrines and precepts of the other religions. The August, 2000 declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* says that God "does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals, but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression even when they contain 'gaps, insufficiencies and errors'. Therefore, the sacred books of other religions, which in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers, receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace which they contain (§8)."

By discerning the *first* and the *second* moment of God's self-communication in these religions and distinguishing the original spiritual gift from its human interpretations and categories, we may be able to participate in the spiritual experience of the other and be receptive to the ways other religions proclaim and live their experience of God. By

<sup>9</sup> "In religious experience it is possible to distinguish between a superstructure which I call belief and an infrastructure which I call faith. The superstructure is the external word, the external revelation, the external reality, the word used in history and culturally conditioned. The infrastructure is the interior word, the word which addresses the heart, the intimate revelation." (W. Johnston, *L'œil Intérieur. Mysticisme et Religion* [Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1982], 82-83).

transcending the categorical expressions of other religions we reach “a much deeper level, that of the spirit, where exchange and sharing give a mutual witness to one’s beliefs and a common exploration of one’s respective religious convictions.”<sup>10</sup> The aim of interreligious dialogue is a deeper conversion of all towards God and everyone is invited “to leave one’s previous spiritual or religious situation in order to direct oneself towards another.”<sup>11</sup> “The Christian theologian in dialogue with the other is called faithfully to reflect on the experience of tracing a pilgrimage of constant departure which is also an entry into this fullness which God promises.”<sup>12</sup>

By converting oneself more and more to God, one comes closer to Truth. NA, §2 states that in the manner of life and conduct, in the precepts and teachings of these religions, there is a reflection of that truth which enlightens all people. This does not mean that the Truth, which enlightens all religions, is still hidden and inconceivable. Truth is not the outcome of complementary truths found in other religions. Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth and the life.” *Dialogue and Proclamation* states, however, that “the fullness of truth received in Jesus Christ does not give individual Christians the guarantee that they have grasped that truth fully. In the last analysis truth is not a thing we possess, but a person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. This is an unending process” (§49). In order to reflect on this important aspect of the interreligious dialogue we need to consider the second moment of this discussion.

<sup>10</sup> DP, §40.

<sup>11</sup> Secretariat for Non-Christians, “The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission,” AAS 75 (1984): §37.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 219.

## 2. The Theoretical Moment

In the contemplation to gain love, St. Ignatius invites the retreatant to search and find God in everything. This is not a nameless and abstract God but the God of *Jesus Christ*. God’s truth was made visible and accessible in the particular history of Jesus of Nazareth. God does not exclude humanity. The human Jesus defines God’s very essence. “It is precisely God’s *deity* which, rightly understood, includes his *humanity*.”<sup>13</sup> God can be humanly expressed since God is also human in his being. *Dominus Iesus* declares that “the truth about God is not abolished or reduced because it is spoken in human language” (§6).

The *human* God is not less than God. God finds his appropriate and adequate self-expression in the humanity of Jesus. This does not dissolve the mysterious character of God’s revelation, but it is manifest in Jesus Christ. We should not look for God beyond the humanity of Jesus, but we should always go beyond our relative and finite ways of expressing the mystery of incarnation.

This truth qualifies the identity of the Christian faith as a revealed religion. To set *this* truth aside means to alter Christianity and to make interreligious dialogue impossible because Christians would enter into dialogue without their own identity. We would not have a “sincere reverence,” if we dialogue already with a presumption, a common denominator for all religions called the unfathomable Mystery, into which we reduce all religions into one.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, each religion is in dialogue with its own presuppositions.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox, 1960), 46.

<sup>14</sup> See Paolo Gamberini, “Kenosi e universalità del cristianesimo,” *Filosofia e Teologia* 17 (2003): 426-434.

To argue the truth of Christian faith is very complex in the cultural context of our days, which is *on one side* relativist and *on the other side* marked by a clash of civilizations and religions; but we cannot deny truth or become agnostic, either saying that truth cannot be known, or saying that truth is what the majority decides.<sup>15</sup>

In a speech at the Pontifical Lateran University on May 12, 2004, the President of the Italian Senate, Marcello Pera, asked, "If one truth is equal to another truth, why should we dialogue? And if in faith there is no truth, how can we ever be saved?"<sup>16</sup> According to Pera absolute truth bars dialogue or an acknowledgment of what "is true and holy" in other religions, as *NA*, §2 and *Ad Gentes*, §9 declare.

To answer this serious objection we need to articulate in the right way the *criterion* and the *condition* of truth, in order to avoid both relativism and fundamentalism. Whoever dialogues is well aware of his own *criterion* of truth (Torah, Holy Scriptures, Qu'ran). Denying what makes a Jew a Jew, a Christian a Christian, ignoring that everyone is committed thoroughly to *his* measure of truth, boycotts and does not promote dialogue at all. To leave one's own belief in order to be in dialogue with the other would change dialogue into a monologue. Instead, each religion must question and clarify, what are the *criterion* and *condition* of the truth it claims.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See Joseph Ratzinger, *Fede-Verità-Tolleranza. Il Cristianesimo e le Religioni del Mondo* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2003), 115ff.

<sup>16</sup> M. Pera, "Il Relativismo, il Cristianesimo e l'Occidente," Lezione alla Pontificia Università Lateranense per i 150 anni di fondazione della Facoltà di diritto civile, Roma, 12 maggio 2004, <http://www.senato.it/presidente/21572/21575/28223/composizioneattopresidente.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> By *criterion* we mean the objective reference (*in se*) of what constitutes an identity; by *condition* we mean the *perspective (pro nobis)* in and through which that objective reference is perceived. To deny this

When Christians proclaim *their* truth, they refer to the way this truth became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. There is a deep link between *the* truth and *this* Jesus, as it is stated in Jesus' affirmation: "I am the truth" (Jn 14:6). This is quite a paradoxical affirmation and in certain way intolerant. This identification between the "I" of Jesus and the *Truth* is intolerable for everyone who encourages relativism, but also for those who oppose any form of fundamentalism. Behind that "I" there may be hidden an institution or an ideology, or even a church. If God is the Truth, whoever (an individual, a group, or a religion) stands on God's side is also in the truth and becomes the interpreter of truth. The attributes of God's Word qualify God's spokespersons.

In order to understand the paradoxical character of the Johannine affirmation we must pay attention to the proximal context of Jesus' self-definition: the paschal experience. "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (Jn 13:1). Jesus' passion, death and resurrection reveal that in the identification between *Truth* and the *I* of Jesus a deeper revelation of God and a different way of defining truth have been shown. Jesus' self-giving for others (*kénosis*) is the essential *condition* by which Jesus expresses his being the truth of God the Father. There is a deep connection between "I am the Truth" of Jesus' saying and the Johannine affirmation that summarizes the whole Easter event: "There is no greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). Becoming the neighbor of whoever was poor, sick and marginal, until he made himself "friend of

correlative dimension of truth leads either to reducing the objective reference to one's own perspective (*relativism*) or to making one's own perspective the criterion of truth (*fundamentalism*). See V. Melchiorre, *Essere e Parola* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1982).

sinners” (cf. Mt 11:19), Jesus manifested that the *criterion* of his truth is the experience of otherness which has its origin in God the Father and has its end in embracing the other.

Jesus’ identification with the Truth reveals that God defines his very being in the humanity of Jesus and in him God has assumed the extreme otherness of the sinner. Jesus emptied himself so totally for the sake of others, that his life was defined in relation to sinners. That God affirms himself in relation to another from himself, to that wholly other who is the sinner, this belongs to the paschal revelation of God, which can be recapitulated in the Johannine expression “God is Love” (1 Jn 4:8).

The very possibility that God becomes other from himself is God’s very essence which is constituted by inner relations: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Without denying biblical monotheistic faith, Christians believe that the *one* God is not an absolute being, resting in splendid solitude. The God of *Jesus Christ* is ontologically open within and beyond himself. Therefore, the category of “otherness” finds in the Christian idea of God its foundation. If interreligious dialogue is made possible by acknowledging the *other* in his difference and limits, then the logic guiding this dialogue is the same as that of the paschal existence, when Jesus laid down his life for the others, and of the Trinitarian life, where each person in the one God exists for the sake of the other person.

This different God calls for a *different* understanding of what truth is. We may quote Saint Augustine: “We do not enter into Truth but through Love” (*Non entratur in veritatem nisi per charitatem*).<sup>18</sup> God is not afraid of dialogue as the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) declares: “The invisible God (see Col 1:15, 1 Tm 1:17) out of

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, “De Gratia contra Faustum,” *Opera*, F. Tempsey - G. Freytag, Lipsia 1891, XXXII, cap. XVIII.

the abundance of His love speaks to human beings as friends (see Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15) and lives among them (see Bar 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself” (§2). The absolute truth is essentially “conversational” and “self-communication.” “Truth itself may become for us an idol, because truth, separated from love, is not God: it becomes an image, an idol which we must neither love nor adore.”<sup>19</sup> In a Christian perspective, truth and dialogue are neither opposed nor juxtaposed: they essentially correspond to each other.

This relation, between truth and dialogue, determines what kind of *universality* may be attributed to Christian truth. If Christian identity originates from the life-style and thought-style of Jesus, we have to avoid any form of exclusive or inclusive Christianity in dialogue with other religions. “Instead of diminishing the scandal of the Word made flesh, in order to ease interreligious dialogue, it is necessary to show how the principle of incarnation, that the Absolute reveals Himself in and through a historical particularity, invites us not to make Christianity an absolute, that is, a religion excluding others.”<sup>20</sup> If Jesus is defined by his relation to others, it means that also the *other* religions define Christ’s event. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, §48-49 states:

[W]hile remaining firm in their belief that in Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and humanity (cf. 1 Tm 2:4-6), the fullness of revelation has been given to them, Christians must remember that God has also manifested himself in some way to the followers of other religious traditions. Consequently, it is with receptive minds that

<sup>19</sup> B. Pascal, *Pensieri*, a Cura di Paolo Serini 3rd ed. (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1988), n. 541, 314.

<sup>20</sup> C. Geffré, “Le pluralisme religieux comme question théologique,” *Vie spirituelle* 3 (1998) : 586

they approach the convictions and values of others. The fullness of truth received in Jesus Christ does not give individual Christians the guarantee that they have grasped that truth fully. In the last analysis truth is not a thing we possess, but a person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. This is an unending process.<sup>21</sup>

Only to God is known how the many religions participate in the work of the Holy Spirit and how they can be associated with the paschal mystery.<sup>22</sup> “On the last day the mysterious convergence of all religions among them will be revealed together with their meaning within God’s one plan of salvation.”<sup>23</sup> In the meantime, however, if it is true that God is love, the way the Spirit of Christ touches every human person is by the experience of mutual love.

To give a Christian account of the experience of being in relationship with the other, committed always to living ‘in between’ *this* concrete position within history and the fullness of meaning which comes at the end of history and which can only be anticipated in hope, is only possible if one is willing to take the risk of crossing the threshold, of encountering the other person.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. The *Practical* Moment

After examining the methodological and theoretical dimensions of interreligious dialogue, we consider now the *practical* moment. In order to make the Catholic Church

<sup>21</sup> N.B. “The Spirit of truth will lead you to the complete truth” (Jn 16:13).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, § 22.

<sup>23</sup> C. Geffré “Le pluralisme religieux comme question théologique,” *Vie spirituelle* 3 (1998), 584.

<sup>24</sup> M. Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, 226.

receptive to interreligious dialogue in authentic spirit, both *realism* and *discernment* are necessary.

First of all *realism*: everyone should seek to comprehend the religion of the other as the other understands it, according to its own parameters and not according to a superficial idea of that religion. Speaking about Islam in the post-synodal Apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, John Paul II said that a proper relationship with Islam needs to be conducted prudently, “with clear ideas about possibilities and limits, and with confidence in God’s saving plan for all his children. It is also necessary to take into account the notable gap between European culture, with its profound Christian roots, and Muslim thought” (§57).

Together with realism we need also *discernment*. This asks first of all for an *ethical* foundation, which is the *golden rule* found in many religions: “Do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 7:12); “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lv 19:18); “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself” (40 Hadith An-Nawawi, 13); “This is the sum of the Dharma: do nothing unto others which would cause you pain if done to you” (Mahabharata 5:1517). Card. Karl Lehmann declared that:

[T]he problem of violence in every religion is of utmost importance. Whoever wants to dictate his conviction with power and violence cuts himself off from any kind of interreligious dialogue. Every religion should examine in which way its own image of God pursues an ideal of violent imposition of her belief upon the others [...] Each religion should be critical of certain praxis of religious

coercion (for Christian churches: heresy, inquisition, missions).<sup>25</sup>

Discernment should be done not only on an ethical base but also a *spiritual* one. The eschatological event of God, who became human in Jesus, continues in the self-identification of Christ with the little ones, the hungry, the thirsty and the excluded (cf Mt 25:35). As God became *other-from-himself* (Incarnation) by being *other-in-himself* (Trinity), so Christians are called everyday to discover their own identity by becoming other than themselves. Saint Paul says:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.<sup>26</sup>

Paul defines his own identity by relating it to others:

He meets those who are under the Law not without that Law that binds to the problems of the Law. He meets the weak not as the strong one, in order to let them feel more greatly the suffering caused by their weaknesses. He does not face the Jews as a Christian who denies them the authenticity of their specific way to God. He meets everybody with what identifies each one of them before others and before God. Paul's *ego* constitutes himself by

<sup>25</sup> Karl Lehmann, "Una religione tra le altre," *Il regno-documenti* 48 (2003): 46.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Cor 9:20-22.

encountering the human and religious determining factors of the other. Through these strong denotations of the other Paul articulates his own identity in a plural way. He needs these strong factors which determine the identity of the other, in order to find his own way to God, overcoming his own weakness and his inclination to violence.<sup>27</sup>

Translating this into the language of interreligious dialogue, we may say that the Christian is called to become a Jew, to become a Muslim, "for the sake of the gospel" (1 Cor 9:23). It is not simply becoming more tolerant or respectful for the dignity of the other. As God became human by remaining God, so the Christian is called to become a refugee with the refugees, an outcast with the outcast, a Muslim with the Muslims, by remaining himself. The more as a *Christian* he dialogues, the more he will be able to be incarnated in the belief and in the life of the other believer, and vice versa. The model for such dialogue is Jesus' relationship with the Father. "Through participation in that relationship – Father and Son united by the Spirit of love – Christians learn how to relate to others. The analogy of "mutual indwelling" (*perichoresis*) of the divine persons within the Godhead teaches the virtues and practice of hospitality and welcome."<sup>28</sup> The more Christians dwell in the way of believing and of living of Muslims, of Jews, of Hindus, the more they will understand their own Christian identity and why God's being is defined as Love.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> H.-J. Sander, "Il cristiano nel postmoderno: identità plurale," *Il Regno-attualità* 50 (2005): 23.

<sup>28</sup> M. Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, 228.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Frank Whaling, *Christian Theology and World Religions. A Global Approach*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1986), 130-131.

“To be ‘oneself as another’ entails a participation in the mystery of God’s self-giving which alone can mend the ‘broken middle’ of interfaith relations.”<sup>30</sup> By getting to know the spiritual tradition of the other, Christians understand better their own faith, purifying it from what causes obstacles or misunderstandings in the partner. At the same time differences between the Christian faith and the other religions may appear more clearly. Everyone will understand his own religious identity not without the others but in relation to the others.<sup>31</sup> “If Christian identity is found only in generous-hearted relationship, in learning to see ‘oneself as another,’ then it will be through trust in the Spirit that constant conversion is made possible. Faith, love and hope are reciprocal dimensions of the Christian life, manifestations of God’s own self-giving, the grace which makes for human flourishing.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> M. Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, 207.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. “The Spirit of God breaks through the self-enclosed world we inhabit; the Spirit re-creates us and sets us on the road toward becoming what I like to call a ‘catholic personality’, a personal microcosm of the eschatological new creation. A catholic personality is a personality enriched by otherness, a personality which is what it is only because multiple others have been reflected in it in a particular way. The distance from my own culture that results from being born by the Spirit creates a fissure in me through which others can come in. The Spirit unlatches the doors of my heart saying: ‘You are not only you; others belong to you too’” (M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996], 51). “One does not live without others. This means that one does not live without fighting with others. So we need, not just once but everyday, to give up the naive conviction that ‘we understand each other’, and to get out of the sentimental meanderings, by which we hoped to hide under certain expressions and defenses the reality of the other” (M. De Certeau, *Mai Senza L’altro* [Magnano: Qiqiaon, 1993], 41).

<sup>32</sup> M. Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, 228.

In conclusion, I summarize the three moments mentioned above as three theses:

1) The dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises invites us to listen and to acknowledge in the other the work of the Spirit by distinguishing the religious experience of God from its consequent theoretical and ethical interpretations;

2) The Spirit at work in the other religions is the Spirit of *Jesus Christ*, who became a human being for others;

3) Interreligious dialogue lives the eschatological tension between the *already and not yet*. This tension should not be explained by means of a theory but lived and supported in the praxis of a believing love.