

Nine Notes for a Reflection on Religion

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In order to transform the political and religious frontiers of the Mediterranean through dialogue it is necessary to establish some basic lines. In the first place, the region needs to rediscover its homogeneous identity while maintaining its cultural diversity. In the second place, religion presents different dimensions of human beings at a social and transcendental level, so it must not be overlooked. The citizens of the Mediterranean have woven their identity based on religion, which provokes the need for real dialogue with the aim of learning from the interlocutor. Thus, religions as social phenomena must regenerate and avoid fundamentalisms in order to find peace. Moreover, given that religion and politics are indissolubly linked, we must also foster political dialogue in the most social sense and in the framework of democracy.

To continue with my tradition, I will draw nine telegraphic points that will serve for the debate or perhaps will be left to one side. Inspired by Mohamed Arkoun, who argues that language is of great importance, I would say that frontiers confront us, although they also unite us. The frontier is that which separates and that which unites.

1. The Mediterranean is not only a historical frontier, nor exclusively geographical, but essentially cultural. And it is perhaps the lack of identity and the hopeful future of rediscovering this identity in the Mediterranean space, which is not only historical or geographical, but also cultural, with cultures whose diversity forms its richness.

2. Frontiers are political and religious at the same time. We must distinguish them, but we cannot separate them, given that religion and politics are closely linked. A religion without politics, in the most exact sense of the word, is

purely ideology or is impotent. In its turn, a politics without religion is impotent (a technique) or becomes a religion from the moment that it seeks to constitute itself as a representative of ultimate and fundamental values. A politics that places democracy as a dogma, to put it this way, is not a religion.

3. Using language, the term “religion” has a triple meaning that I think is worth distinguishing, although I do not believe it can be isolated. Religion can mean *religiosity*, as an anthropological fact according to which all men, for the fact of being so, have a dimension that separates them from animals and makes them aware of the infinite, the unknown, which no word can describe; the ineffable, that something else. This would be *religiosity*, which as a human dimension unites us all.

Then there is *religiology*; that is, given that we are intellectual beings, we interpret this fact and extract the diverse theologies, the religious

systems, belief systems... We must not confuse this belief with faith; all men have faith. However, beliefs are the intellectual expressions of this faith, which is a heritage of humanity.

And, in a third sense, religion can mean *religionism*, understood as man's *belonging*, the *need to make* society, to feel ourselves as part of a community.

For this, we cannot confuse religions, as has happened on more than one occasion, with a mere sociological fact. It is a sociological fact, in effect, but not exclusively.

These three meanings are necessary and so we cannot separate them. There is no religion that, as a fact of religiosity, does not express itself in a certain way and does not create a certain community.

The most sublime and heroic acts have been carried out in the name of religion; the most insulting and lowest acts have also been carried out in the name of religion

4. The religious fact has forged and destroyed Europe. It has forged it in the sense that it has been the fruit of a religious momentum, passing through Greece, Rome, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and many other religions. However, now it is eroding it. Let us not forget that when speaking of religion, the religious fact is the representative of the best that there is in us, and also the worst. The most sublime and heroic acts have been carried out in the name of religion; the most insulting and lowest acts have also been carried out in the name of religion. Let us not forget.

Today, the Christian roots of Europe are often disputed, and called into doubt. But what can be said is that the results are not Christian. And if we boast of these Christian roots and the results are not Christian, perhaps we should ask ourselves if these roots are a little impoverished. We should bear in mind that

religions cannot be put into capsules, cannot be hermetically sealed in themselves. They suffocate. But neither can they be diluted so that all the frontiers disappear.

Hence, the need to open windows without closing doors, to preserve an identity open to the world. In other words, the need for dialogue. Without dialogue there is no full human life, and to have dialogue many things are necessary: we have to listen; and we cannot listen without understanding, but we cannot understand if we do not love, and we do not love without knowledge.

5. So that we can, in some way, know each other, listen to each other, try to understand each other, we must see each other, talk to each other, touch each other; and for this we need a more feminine attitude, to allow ourselves to be fertilised by the Other: what is often called *cross-fertilisation*. I call it the "mutual fertilisation that leads to dialogue"; it is about learning from each other, and not trying to defend from the outset our own positions. If we do not act this way, we will head towards confrontation. Dialogue is indispensable at all levels. One of the positive strengths of democracy is that it allows and favours this dialogue.

6. Religions do not practise dialogue enough. In 2004, Catalonia was the seat, for the second consecutive time, of a World Parliament of Religions, whose aim was for religions to talk, to dialogue on the basis of equality.

7. This dialogue must also take place with politics – as we mentioned before, religions cannot close in on themselves. We need a political dialogue in the sense of *polis*, of sociology, of the world in which we live.

The function of this dialogue is twofold: in the first place, to avoid being in heaven, like a *topos uranios* that does not exist, to keep our feet on the earth; and in the second place, to cooperate with others. Let us not forget that the true dialogue always requires a third interlocutor.



European rabbis (PG/Magnum/Contacto).

8. Recalling the past, I remember a city in the centre of India, around forty years ago, where Catholics and Protestants argued excitedly in a meeting called by the Ecumenical Council of Churches, in which the Protestants unwittingly supported the Catholic theory of the sacraments, and the three or four Catholics who were there defended, unwittingly, the Protestant theory of the sacraments. Why? Because everyone is more aware of what they lack.

In this respect, the Islam-Christianity dialogue has a fundamental defect: it is a dialogue for two, so it would require a third interlocutor. When I say, to the shock of many people, that the destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque (India) – barely covered by the press – has caused a more profound trauma in the psyche of human-

ity than the destruction of the Twin Towers in September 2001, people think: “And how can this be?” Let us not forget that this trauma and this injury had fallen on a population far more numerous than the whole of Europe, Russia and America together. One thousand two hundred million people were traumatised by the destruction of that mosque, but as the event has not had media coverage, we have remained somewhat on the margins. With this I mean that we should not try to embark upon a dialogue alone, we should not commit Eurocentrism, or forget that there is a key problem, peace, and that all religions try to be paths to achieve this peace.

9. Finally, religions cannot take shape only by looking to the past or focusing on themselves. To put it in religious words: religions

must “convert” themselves. They, which have sought to convert others so much, must start by converting themselves; not only to return to the past, but to open the path towards an unknown future. They must transform, and I think today we are facing the labour pains of this gradual more or less conscious transformation of all religions.

We must bear in mind that we cannot go further into dialogue and represent the religious fact of this Europe if we only focus on history or if we only look to the past. If we assume

that religion is a living fact, as I understand we do, this means that it is a constant creation at each moment. Nobody can oblige us to say in a totalitarian way: “You, as a religion, must speak in a certain way, and I, as a religion, must speak another way,” for which reason I ask *religiously* for the other way of speaking to be respected. Thanks to this we will manage to eliminate fear. This *metanoia*, this death and resurrection, are necessary for the religious fact itself. Otherwise, we would be talking about archaeology in the most pejorative sense of the word.