

John Paul II and Christian-Muslim Relations

In his first public address following his election on October 16, 1978 Pope John Paul II described himself as “a man from a far country.” From the time he was a student his country was occupied by Nazi Germany and, later, by Soviet Communism. Many in the media were of the opinion that such a background could not augur well for a culture of dialogue that his predecessor Paul VI had initiated. And yet, throughout his twenty-seven-year pontificate, John Paul II proved that he was an eager and fast learner as well as a very good listener. Although he embraced tradition, he succeeded in striking cordial and at times even friendly relations with many political leaders, including those who espoused systems that ran counter to his core beliefs. He also created a solid and deeply respectful relationship with quite a few religious authorities. One need only cite, by way of example, his rapport with President Sandro Pertini (1896-1990),¹ the former partisan and staunch Socialist, to say nothing of the bond of friendship which he struck with Elio Toaff (1915-2015), then rabbi of the Rome synagogue and Chief Rabbi of the Jewish community in Italy, and his statement in the Rome synagogue in which he referred to the Jews as “our elder brothers.”²

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¹ Sandro Pertini was President of the Republic of Italy from 1978 till 1985.

² Pope John Paul II's discourse during his visit to the Rome Synagogue on 13 April 1986. See http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1986/april/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19860413_synagoga-roma.html (accessed 17 October 2019).

As to John Paul II's encounter with Muslims, there are two important points that need to be clarified at the outset. The first one is that during most of his ministry, the Muslim world and the world at large were not as yet threatened by Islamic extremism that has instigated countless terrorist attacks. This began to manifest itself toward the end of his pontificate. Furthermore, the phenomenon of the internet and globalisation were just beginning to make their impact in the world of intercommunication and global politics. This should not be taken to mean that the Pope had a limited knowledge of world affairs. His numerous apostolic journeys and pilgrimages had provided him with a constant flow of first-hand information on what was taking place worldwide. His encounter with Muslims underwent a development and his focus on dialogue gradually assumed a more global outlook. He was capable of maturing his ideas and was more than ready to embrace new ones as an integral part of his role and mission as leader of the Catholic Church.

The purpose of this article is to explore various facets of Pope John Paul II's engagement in dialogue with Muslims and how these contributed toward the evolution of his approach to Christian-Muslim dialogue. Throughout this essay I will reflect upon four key speeches that manifest the development, as well as the richness, of John Paul II's engagement with Muslims worldwide. They also provide food for thought in the light of continuous efforts on the part of the Catholic Church to pursue dialogue with Muslim communities across the globe.

The Philippines (1981)

Barely three years into his pontificate John Paul II embarked on an apostolic journey that led him to visit Pakistan, the Philippines, and Japan. During his stay in the Philippines he encountered representatives of the Muslim community on February 20, 1981 in Davao, which is known as a highly volatile region. This address needs to be taken within the context of the political-religious situation that was developing in the Philippine archipelago and especially in the south of the country which has a substantial Muslim minority. The so-called Moro people who inhabit this area had for decades been in a state of war with the government of the then President Ferdinand Marcos who for many years had ruled through the imposition of martial law. During this specific visit the Pope took the unprecedented step of addressing his audience in the following words:

Dear Brothers, it is always a pleasure for me to meet the members of the Muslim communities during my journeys, and to give them my personal greetings and those of all their Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world.

I deliberately *address you as brothers*: that is certainly what we are, because we are members of the same human family, whose efforts, whether people realise it or not, tend toward God and the truth that comes from him. But we are especially brothers in God, who created us and to whom we are trying to reach, in our own ways, through faith, prayer, and worship, through the keeping of his law and through submission of his designs.³

The first significant note is the fact that the Pope addresses his Muslim audience as “brothers.” This is the first time that he uses such a term with Muslims. He applies this term in a twofold manner, first in order to affirm their place within the human family willed and created by God and secondly, as believers together with Christians in the one God who is the source of life and to whom we all return. This leads him to affirm the common calling of both Christians and Muslims to build a better future *together*. He introduces himself as “the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church,” an appellation that he would employ frequently when speaking in an interreligious forum and in his role as a messenger of peace.

He then proceeds to underline the common identity of Muslims and Christians as *citizens*. Both of them participate “in the life of the nation with all the obligations and duties that this involves.” He furthermore stresses the contribution that Filipino Muslims can give, something which adds to their “shared national identity an original element that merits attention and respect.” All this “requires a *climate of mutual esteem and trust*.” In line with *Nostra aetate* the Pope reiterates the fact that the sad events of the past should not flow into the present and into the future. He subtly implies that what is at stake is the unity and harmonious future of the whole Filipino nation. He notes with satisfaction that there are positive signs to this effect and is quick to mention encounters between Christians and Muslims at the local level. He then proposes two elements that could lead to fruitful interreligious relations: “Society cannot bring citizens the happiness that they expect from it unless society itself is built upon dialogue. Dialogue in turn is built upon trust, and trust presupposes not only justice but mercy.”

³ Pope John Paul II, Speech to Representatives of Muslims of the Philippines, Davao, 20 February 1981, in Francesco Gioia, ed., *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963-2005)* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 273-275; reproduced in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), 2 March 1981. Unless stated otherwise, all citations from the Magisterium of John Paul in matters of Christian-Muslim dialogue are taken from this work.

Hence dialogue built on a sense of trust, which presupposes both justice and mercy, is the surest way forward. Here the Pope is mentioning two key elements that lie at the heart of Muslim articulation of the concept of God namely justice (*‘adl*) and mercy (*rahma*). He reinforces his argument by recalling that in the Qur’ân God is also addressed by “the very beautiful name of *al-Rahmān*,⁴ while the Bible calls him *al-Rahūm*,⁵ the Merciful One. This will become a principal characteristic of John Paul’s addresses to Muslims: he would constantly refer to key terms that are applied in Muslim discourse and Christian theological thought as a way of communicating his message to both Muslim and Christian communities. The next example brings this element more into focus.

Casablanca (1985)

The address to 80,000 young Muslims at Casablanca Stadium took place on 19 August 1985 in the presence of the then ruling monarch Hasan II.⁶ It took place as part of the Apostolic journey which previously had taken John Paul II to Togo, Cameroon, and Kenya. A cursory glance at the text will immediately alert the reader to the fact that this was a well-crafted speech intended to address the hearts and minds of those youths who were present.

He introduces himself to his audience by declaring that “in the Catholic Church I bear the responsibility of the Successor of Peter, the Apostle chosen by Jesus to strengthen his brothers in the faith.”⁷ In this manner he is orthodox in the message that he is conveying. At the same time, he is making himself perfectly intelligible to his audience who have little, if any, knowledge of Christian doctrine, and whose knowledge of Jesus, his life and mission, is drawn solely from what is taught about him in the Qur’ân. The sacred book of Islam refers to a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples during which they seek from him a sign that authenticates his claim to be a messenger of God:

⁴ *Al-Rahmān* (the Lord of Mercy), together with *al-Rāḥīm* (the Giver of Mercy) is mentioned at the beginning of all but one chapter of the Qur’ân

⁵ Here again, *Rahūm*, together with *Ḥanūn*, are Divine attributes that are frequently mentioned in the Bible, the most important being Ex 34:6, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious” (‘ēl *rahūm wēḥanūn*). See also Ps 86:5.15; 103:8; 145:8.

⁶ Hasan II ruled the Kingdom of Morocco from 1961 till 1999. He was succeeded by his son Muḥammad VI.

⁷ John Paul II, Address at Casablanca Stadium, 19 August 1985 in Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 336-344, reproduced in *L’Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), 16 September 1985. Concerning the words of Jesus to Peter, see Lk 22:32.

When the disciples said, "Jesus, son of Mary, can your Lord send down a feast to us from heaven?" he said, "Beware of God if you are true believers." They said, "We wish to eat from it; to have our hearts reassured; to know that you have told us the truth; and to be witnesses of it." Jesus, son of Mary, said, "Lord, send down to us a feast from heaven so that we can have a festival – the first and last of us – and a sign from You. Provide for us: You are the best provider." God said, "I will send it down to you, but anyone who disbelieves after this will be punished with a punishment that I will not inflict on anyone else in the world." (Q. 5:112-115)

It appears that in this passage the disciples are asking Jesus to bring down a table (*mā'ida*) prepared with food. Those who believe in him following the granting of their request will have their "hearts reassured," whereas those who continue to dither or who reject him will be subjected to untold torments. The Qur'ân is aware of the Master-Disciple relationship that existed between Jesus and his followers. When introducing himself to his Muslim audience in the above-mentioned manner, the Pope is therefore affirming the relationship between Jesus and his disciples which is also acknowledged by the Qur'ân, albeit in a different manner. It is interesting to note that in both the case of Jesus' mandate to Peter in the Gospel and that of the disciples' request as recorded in the Qur'ân, the setting is that of a meal. In fact, some scholars connect the Qur'ânic narrative with that of the Last Supper.

Throughout his address the Pope declines to use neutral language. He affirms Catholic teaching on interreligious engagement in the light of both *Lumen gentium*⁸ and *Nostra aetate*⁹ while respectfully appreciating the goodness inherent in the Muslim religion and the merits of Muslims in faithfully upholding their beliefs and practice. The terms that he applies are sound and orthodox and at the same time they were familiar to a Muslim audience steeped in knowledge of the Qur'ân. The following excerpt is sufficient to demonstrate this detail:

I believe that we, Christians and Muslims, must recognise with joy the religious values that we have in common, and give thanks to God for them. Both of us believe in one God,¹⁰ the only God,¹¹ who is all Justice¹² and all Mercy;¹³ we

⁸ See Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* (21 November 1964), 16.

⁹ See Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration *Nostra aetate* (28 October 1965), 3.

¹⁰ See Q. 112:1; 39:3.4; 2:255; 47:19

¹¹ See Q. 3:80; 9:31; 51:26-27. See Dt 6:4

¹² See Q. 2:286; 3:25; 6:164; 14:51; 29:12-13; 35:18; 53:38.

¹³ See Q. 1:1.3; 52:28

believe in the importance of prayer,¹⁴ of fasting,¹⁵ of almsgiving,¹⁶ of repentance¹⁷ and of pardon;¹⁸ we believe that God will be a merciful judge¹⁹ to us at the end of time, and we hope that after the resurrection he will be satisfied with us and we know that we will be satisfied with him.²⁰

These common traits do not, however, diminish the fact that serious differences do exist and will continue to in the future. The Pope underlines this matter factually and, at the same time, prudently. On the other hand, he offers suggestions as to the best way forward, in line with the recommendations of *Nostra aetate*:

Loyalty demands also that we should recognise and respect our differences. Obviously the most fundamental is the view that we hold on the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. You know that, for the Christians, this Jesus causes them to enter into an intimate knowledge of the mystery of God and into a filial communion by his gifts,²¹ so that they recognise him and proclaim him Lord and Saviour.²²

Those are important differences, which we can accept with humility and respect, in mutual tolerance; there is a mystery there on which, I am certain, God will one day enlighten us.²³

¹⁴ See Q. 2:238. Regarding the obligation to prayer see Q. 4:103; 24:56. See also Q. 2:43.110.238.277; 5:55; 8:3; 9:70; 27:3; 31:4. See Mk 1:35; Lk. 6:12; 9:18

¹⁵ See Q. 3:183-185.

¹⁶ See Q. 2:43; see also Q. 22:78; 24:56; 73:21. Cf. Q. 9:59. See Mt 6:1-3.

¹⁷ See Q. 25:71; 28:67. See Lk 5:27-31; 7:36-50

¹⁸ See Q. 47:19; 48:1-3; 53:32; 85:14. See Mt 18:21-34; Lk 15.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Q. 52:21-28; 60:7-8; 73:20. See Mt 25:31-46.

²⁰ See Q. 50:31-35. John Paul II would have the opportunity to highlight these common traits within a wider context, that of the First World Day of Prayer that took place in Assisi on 27 October 1986. In his address at the close of that hitherto singular event, he remarked: "With the other Christians we share many convictions and, particularly, in what concerns peace. With the World Religions we share a common respect of and obedience to conscience, which teaches all of us to seek the truth, to love and serve all individuals and people, and therefore to make peace among nations. Yes, we all hold conscience and obedience to the voice of conscience to be an essential element in the road towards a better and peaceful world. Could it be otherwise, since all men and women in this world have a common nature, a common origin and a common destiny?" http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861027_prayer-peace-assisi-final.html (accessed 17 October 2019).

²¹ Here again one notes that the Pope expresses the fundamental Christian belief and dogma of the Divine Sonship of Jesus that are intelligible to his young Muslim audience.

²² See, for instance, Jn 20:28; Acts 2:21.36; 4:12; Phil 2:11.

²³ The Qur'ân reflects on the situation of religious diversity when it states: "We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community,

Christians and Muslims, in general we have badly understood each other, and sometimes, in the past, we have opposed and even exhausted each other in polemics and in wars.

I believe that, today, God invites us *to change our old practices*. We must respect each other and, also, we must stimulate each other in good works on the path of God.

With me, you know what is the reward of spiritual values. Ideologies and slogans cannot satisfy you; nor can they solve the problems of your life. Only the spiritual and moral values can do it, and they have God as their foundation.

In other words, John Paul II is acknowledging that both Christians and Muslims remain loyal to their own beliefs while remaining respectful of each other's. At the same time, seeing that the majority of young people in his audience will soon be the future and the backbone of political, social, cultural and religious life of Morocco, he is appealing to them, to their fellow Muslims and to Christians all over the world to start afresh. Recriminations of the past could only lead to bitterness and divisiveness, providing a future poisoned with dark memories of past deeds. Furthermore, he appeals to his audience to make a solid contribution as young people on the path of truth and justice in their own country. At the beginning of his speech he brings to the fore the issue of human dignity and human rights, as well as freedom of conscience. He then throws in a challenge accompanied by a timely warning both of which have unfortunately been overlooked or ignored by most secular societies to their detriment:

You are charged with the world of tomorrow. *By fully and courageously undertaking your responsibilities*, you will be able to overcome the existing difficulties. It reverts to you to take the initiative and not to wait for everything to come from the older people and from those in office. You must build the world and not just dream about it.

but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about." (Q. 5:48)

This Qur'ānic text is of fundamental importance to Muslim-Christian dialogue. Michel Cuypers affirms that the Qur'ān is here arguing that this multi-religious situation "has its origin in the unfathomable divine will and its meaning will only be revealed to us after our return to God. In the meantime, in the here-and-now, it is to be lived as a test from God; the only possible response is to emulate one another for the good." Michel Cuypers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'ān*, Preface by Muhammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, trans. by Patricia Kelly (Miami: Convivium Press, 2009), 246. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes from the Qur'ān are taken from *The Qur'ān*, a New Translation by M.A.S. Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also *Letter of Gregory VII to al-Nāṣir* PL 148, col. 450s.

By working in harmony one can be effective... Do not fail, dear young people, to collaborate *with the adults*, especially with your parents and teachers as well as with the “leaders” of society and of the State. The young should not isolate themselves from the others. The young need the adults, just as the adults need the young.

Here, John Paul II reiterates to youths an appeal which he had first made at the beginning of his pontificate. The future is theirs; they are the architects of their own future, but they must build it wisely. A future world should be built by the enthusiasm of the young together with the wise and prudent counsel of adults.

The Pope sets his appeal within the context of Muslims’ belief in the one God who is Creator and author of justice and peace: “We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection.” However, this perception needs to be qualified. It is true that Islam and Judeo-Christianity are monotheistic, but Christians and Muslims in fact do not have an identical vision of the one God. The common journey undertaken by individual believers must not be taken to imply a common creed. This was clearly highlighted by Pope John Paul II himself in a series of answers which later formed part of the book-interview edited by Vittorio Messori in 1993, wherein he stated that:

Whoever knows the Old and New Testaments, and then reads the Qur’ân clearly sees the *process by which it completely reduces Divine Revelation*. It is impossible not to note the movement away from what God said about Himself, first in the Old Testament through the Prophets, and then finally in the New Testament through His Son. In Islam all the richness of God’s self-revelation, which constitutes the heritage of the Old and New Testaments, has definitely been set aside.

Some of the most beautiful names in the human language are given to the God of the Qur’ân, but He is ultimately a God outside of the world, a God who is only *Majesty*, never *Emmanuel*, God-with-us. *Islam is not a religion of redemption*. There is no room for the Cross and the Resurrection. Jesus is mentioned, but only as a prophet who prepares for the last prophet, Muḥammad. There is also mention of Mary, His Virgin Mother, but the tragedy of redemption is completely absent. For this reason, not only the theology but also the anthropology of Islam is very distant from Christianity.²⁴

²⁴ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, edited by Vittorio Messori (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 92-93.

Engagement with Islam will always pose fundamental problems from a doctrinal point of view, especially in the realm of Christology. Although in many ways John Paul II's speech at Casablanca sets out his programme for encounter with the Muslim world throughout his pontificate, the identity and mission of Jesus Christ will remain forever "a sign that is spoken against,"²⁵ and the cross "scandal" and "folly."²⁶

Damascus (2001)

The Pope's apostolic journey to Syria aimed at completing the mission he began the previous year when he made his Jubilee pilgrimage to Cairo and Jerusalem. It also took place just a few months before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington D.C. on 11 September 2001.

The speech he gave in the Umayyad Great Mosque on May 6, 2001 focuses on two major themes: prayer and dialogue. The setting certainly lends itself to both. The place was originally a cathedral built in the form of a Roman basilica, which was gradually converted into a mosque. Furthermore, according to tradition, it houses the remains of John the Baptist, who is considered by Christians as the last prophet and Precursor of Jesus²⁷ and by Muslims as the one who confirmed (*muṣaddiq^{an}*) the coming of Jesus.²⁸ He is venerated by both as a great prophet.

The Pope speaks as one who is well aware of the social and religious interaction between Christians and Muslims which for centuries had been woven into the fabric of daily life in Syria. He begins by mentioning the country as being the venue for Christianity, having known here "vital moments of its growth and doctrinal development,"²⁹ and here are found Christian communities which have lived in peace and harmony with their Muslim neighbours for many centuries."³⁰

²⁵ Lk 2:34. All citations from the Bible are taken from *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁶ 1 Cor 1:23.

²⁷ See Mt 11:13; Lk 16:16.

²⁸ See Q. 3:38-41.

²⁹ There is no doubt that the Pope is here referring to the wealth of patristic teachings that emanated from Syria and from the Middle East especially through the writings of Church Fathers such as John Chrysostom (d. 407), John of Damascus (d. 749) and numerous others.

³⁰ John Paul II, Address to Muslim Leaders, Umayyad Great Mosque of Damascus, 6 May 2001, in Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 840-843; reproduced in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, 2001, Vol. XXIV/1 (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003), 903-906.

The Pope takes up the theme of prayer in order to remind his audience that “man is a spiritual being, called to acknowledge and respect the absolute priority of God in all things.” Both Christians and Muslims acknowledge the need for prayer and its cultivation, especially within their respective places of worship, which he describes as “oases where they meet the All Merciful God on the journey to eternal life, and where they meet their brothers and sisters in the bond of religion.” He also refers to public occasions where Christians and Muslims demonstrate their commonality, such as weddings and funerals where both “remain in silent respect at the other’s prayer, they bear witness to what unites them, without disguising or denying the things that separate.”

As for dialogue, John Paul II wisely begins with affirming the distinct identities of Christianity and Islam. They are two distinct communities and they will remain so. Having said that, he moves on to express the hope that they express themselves “*as communities in respectful dialogue, never more as communities in conflict.*” He continues: “It is crucial for the young to be taught the ways of respect and understanding, so that they will not be led to misuse religion itself to promote or justify hatred and violence.”

This is the most urgent and the most noble bequest religious leaders could hand down to future generations. These words have lost none of their urgency given the tragedy that has engulfed Syria and large swathes of the Middle East since 2011, especially with the three-year occupation of the northern part of the country by ISIS, leading to the brutal massacre of hundreds of Christians and the desecration of churches and shrines.

The Pope highlights the fact that interreligious dialogue, both on a philosophical and on a theological level had been a hallmark of Syrian society for centuries. There have been “moments of harmony, and other moments when dialogue has broken down.” This calls for “forgiveness from the Almighty” and the need “to offer each other forgiveness.”

One would hope that John Paul’s words would again find an echo, as conflict in Syria appears to be drawing to a close and healing of divisions, the plight of refugees and displaced persons, and the reconstruction of the country become ever more urgent issues that require immediate attention.

Speech to the Ambassador of Tunisia (2004)

Up to this point the speeches under review were delivered by John Paul II prior to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and on the Pentagon just outside Washington D.C. The following speech was delivered a little less than three years after this tragedy, two years after the invasion of

Afghanistan and one year into the war in Iraq. The terrible consequences of both conflicts still linger today in the lives of the Afghani and Iraqi people, as well as among those living in the surrounding regions. This speech was delivered on the occasion of the presentation of credentials by the Ambassador of Tunisia to the Holy See, which took place on 27 May 2004. The tone of this address is a lot more somber and ominous, highlighting the effects of violence and the manipulation of religion in order to serve its purposes. He contrasts the caricature of religion, when portrayed as the root of violence and evil, with the role of religion in enlightening humanity to realise its true calling:

The long experience of Christian faith in its dialogue with human societies in the course of history has shown that religion, in its essential truth, is a powerful means of humanisation for mankind. It invites all to respect the Creator and his creation; it reveals to people their dignity as creatures, called to have dominion over the world, directing their history according to God's plans, always seeking the truth and acting as justice and law require.³¹

Law is rooted in justice complemented by love. He reiterates what he had stated earlier that year in his *Message for the World Day of Peace*, namely that justice and love "are but two faces of a single reality." Whereas in his speech in the Philippines the Pope referred to justice and mercy as the basis of trust, here he chooses to pair justice with love, the latter being the opposite of hatred. This choice is not without a valid reason. Religion is concerned with God and his relationship with humanity. Violence is a caricature of this relationship, whereas love reveals the face of God.

The Pope, however is quick to point out that such a realisation is still a long way off. As he approaches the end of his pontificate and the social, political, and religious upheavals that it has witnessed, John Paul II acknowledges that Christianity and Islam still have a long way to go to establish a true dialogue with one another, respectful and truthful, in order to denounce any manipulation of religion to serve violence, and to convince men and women and especially political leaders to engage in new perspectives to build brotherhood and a just and lasting peace for everyone.

³¹ John Paul II, Address to the Ambassador of Tunisia, Vatican City, 17 May 2004 in Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 1078-1080; reproduced in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), 11 June 2004.

Certainly the violence that had been raging especially in the Middle East, the terrorist attacks perpetrated by violent factions within Islam, to say nothing of the religious tinge given to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, both by Muslim extremists and Evangelical sects alike, appear to have seriously challenged the enthusiasm and optimism that many embraced during his early years at the helm of the Catholic Church. They also seriously challenged the concept of a new world order that had arisen in the light of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the subsequent demise of the Soviet Union, and the end of communist hegemony in Eastern Europe. In this address to the Ambassador of Tunisia the Pope was indeed placing his hand on an open and festering wound. Radical Muslim and Evangelical organisations (especially those hailing from the United States) have proved to be elitist and exclusive, thereby excluding each other and applying a language that both understand perfectly; both create an instrumental bond between religion and politics. The Middle East and North Africa (even though Europe is by no means excluded) are facing, on the one hand, the sustained politicisation of Islam and, on the other, the manipulation of Christianity within the context of global political strategies.³² Both thrive on proselytism, an absolutist and uncompromising statement of their position, together with an aggressive approach in their preaching rather than on witness and sharing. Such attitudes have always spelled disaster and will continue to do so.

At the outset of his pontificate John Paul II had urged Christians to “open wide the doors to Christ.” He oversaw, and to a great extent contributed, to the fall of Communism which ushered in a torrent of hope in a united Europe stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals.³³ But this unity turned out to be built not on faith but on economic factors which sought to marginalise Christianity. This attitude was evident in the opposition certain European states voiced to the acknowledgement and mention of the contribution of Christianity to the development of Europe in the text of a proposed European Constitution. Also, beginning with the 1990s Europe witnessed a significant demographic shift through migration from the Middle East, due to the First Gulf War, from the Balkans, due to war in the former Yugoslavia, and from North Africa, due to

³² This highly volatile situation is vividly portrayed in Jean Benjamin Sleiman, *Dans le piège irakien. Le cri du cœur de l'archevêque de Baghdad* (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 2006). See especially Chapter VIII.

³³ This phrase was originally coined by President Charles De Gaulle of France during a state visit to the then Federal Republic of Germany (4-9 September 1962), but John Paul II adopted it in order to express his vision of how a united Europe inspired by the Christian faith should move forward into the 21st century.

civil wars, famine, and drought. Migration to European countries from former colonies such as Tunisia and Algeria following independence or from Middle Eastern regions as guest workers following World War II had already taken place. The religious void created by decades of secularism was now being filled by the emergence of a religion that claimed to cater not only to the religious needs but also to the political, cultural, and personal aspirations of many, a religion in which the religious and the political realms are distinguished but not separated, namely Islam.

In the light of the above, Pope John Paul II's words in his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* (28 June 2003) remain ever so relevant:

A proper relationship with Islam is particularly important. As has often become evident in recent years to the Bishops of Europe, this "needs to be conducted prudently, with clear ideas about possibilities and limits, and with confidence in God's saving plan for all his children"³⁴ It is also necessary to take into account the notable gap between European culture, with its profound Christian roots, and Muslim thought.³⁵

In this regard, Christians living in daily contact with Muslims should be properly trained in an objective knowledge of Islam and enabled to draw comparisons with their own faith.³⁶

Conclusion

Throughout these past two decades the phrase "clash of civilisations" has been turned into a cliché that is being constantly spouted *ad nauseam*. The underlying threat facing European societies today is not that of a "clash of civilisations." It is rather a confrontation between a secularism that is being transformed into a religion and an Islam that is being increasingly portrayed as an ideology.

On the one hand, we have a secularism that is becoming increasingly obsessed with wanting to edit religion out of the public forum by applying means that are reminiscent of a religious fanaticism of bygone times: ridicule, demonise, and destroy. Contrary to secularity, secularism is not happy with the mere drawing of the distinction between religion and state and the necessity on the part

³⁴ Synod of Bishops – First Special Assembly for Europe, *Final Declaration* (13 December 1991), 9; *Enchiridion Vaticanum: Documenti Ufficiali della Santa Sede*, Vol. 13, 1991-1993, (Bologna: EDB, 1995), par. 656.

³⁵ Synod of Bishops – Second Special Assembly for Europe (1-23 October 1999), *Propositio* 11.

³⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* (28 June 2003), 57. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa.html (accessed 18 October 2019).

of both to maintain their autonomy while at the same time collaborating for the common good. As a movement secularism is bent on desecrating all those symbols and beliefs that religious people hold dear, and which they consider an integral part of their life and which define their role in society. It does not limit itself to criticizing religious beliefs and attitudes; it enthusiastically holds them up to public ridicule in order to humiliate them and, subsequently, edit them out of existence permanently.³⁷ At the same time secular societies are being faced with Islamic movements that seek to present religious belief and conduct as homogenous and uniform, doing away with inculturation and seeking to present a monolithic mode of belief and conduct. The sometimes enforced wearing of the *hiğāb* (or the *niqāb*), the increase in the number of Muslim men wearing long beards, the frequent branding of European societies as decadent, immoral and corrupt are typical of this attitude.

All this provides ample reason for serious reflection on John Paul II's efforts at addressing the challenge posed by Islam to Christian communities living in an increasingly secularised and secularizing society, as well as in promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue. In the four instances that have been considered above we have seen the Pope upholding and preaching with conviction the truths of the Catholic faith while at the same time giving careful consideration to the teachings of Islam. His magisterium offers clear indications as to the purpose of such dialogue, and indeed all interreligious dialogue. This is made amply clear already in his first encyclical *Redemptor hominis*. In that part of the document wherein he dwelled upon the issue of dialogue between Catholics and believers belonging to other religions, John Paul II came up with this judicious remark which should lead all Christians to undertake a profound self-examination:

Does it not sometimes happen that the firm belief of the followers of the non-Christian religions – a belief that is also an effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body – can make Christians ashamed at being often themselves so disposed to doubt concerning the truths revealed by

³⁷ At the height of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, the *Jyllands-Posten* came up with a cartoon depicting St Joseph pointing an accusing finger at the Virgin Mary with the child Jesus in her arms. The caption below it read: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman!" Long before the film *Submission* was aired on Dutch television, Theo van Gogh had already caused many an uproar by pouring scorn and abuse on Dutch Jews and by calling Jesus Christ "that rotten fish from Nazareth". See Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), 91. See also Martin Newland, "I am a Catholic. I'm also sane. But these days people find it hard to accept that religion and rationality can co-exist": <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/oct/16/politics.homeaffairs> (accessed 18 October 2019).

God and proclaimed by the Church and so prone to relax moral principles and open the way to ethical permissiveness. It is a noble thing to have a predisposition for understanding every person, analyzing every system and recognizing what is right; this does not at all mean losing certitude about one's own faith³⁸ or weakening the principles of morality, the lack of which will soon make itself felt in the life of whole societies, with deplorable consequences besides.³⁹

John Paul II believed in clarity both in his upholding of Catholic orthodoxy and in his engagement with Muslims through dialogue. James V. Schall elaborates on this point when he writes that the motivation behind such encounters, especially if they discuss doctrinal issues,

is to clear up misunderstandings about what the parties might hold to be true, together with explanations of the grounds on which those views are held to be valid. The assumption is that while, in principle, fundamental disagreements may exist, any problems that are based on confusions of terminology, misunderstandings of meaning, or historical conditions alone, ought not to be left unresolved.⁴⁰

I would like to conclude these brief reflections by referring to a specific incident that neatly sums up both his character and his convictions. During the days following the announcement of his death on 2 April 2005, the BBC World Service dedicated a series of programmes, including interviews and panels, to a discussion of every possible aspect of his leadership of the Catholic Church. My attention was particularly drawn to an interview held with the late Dr Zaki Badawi, former Head of the Muslim College in London. He constantly praised the efforts of the late pontiff in the realm of interreligious dialogue. At that point the interviewer asked how one could square such a positive appraisal of the Pope in this area with the document *Dominus Iesus*? Dr Badawi's reply was both surprising and subtle: "I have no problem with *Dominus Iesus*. If I, as a Muslim, were not convinced that my religion was the best, I wouldn't be a Muslim in the first place". Such a statement is in effect a resounding endorsement of the

³⁸ See First Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, Cap. III *De fide*, can. 6: *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, Vol.3 (Bologna: Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, 1973), 811.

³⁹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis* (4 March 1979), 6. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptorhominis.html#%24K (accessed 24 October 2019).

⁴⁰ James V. Schall, "Preface: Dialogues without Resolution," in *The Patriarch and the Caliph: An Eighth-Century Dialogue between Timothy I and al-Mahdī*, A parallel English-Arabic text edited, translated, and annotated by Samir Khalil Samir and Wafik Nasry (Provo/UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2018), xi.

fundamental principle in John Paul II's approach to interreligious dialogue and, in this specific case, an affirmation that between Catholics and Muslims, love and loyalty toward one's own faith tradition and openness toward that of the other are indeed central.

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