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Mission and Dialogue in the context of Christian-Muslim Relations

1. Witness meets Witness

Christian-Muslim relations in all their multi-faceted complexity (religious in the strict sense, cultural, societal, political) are fundamentally an encounter of believers called to give, through life and word, a witness. Furthermore, both religions, Christianity and Islam stand in a relationship of mutual challenge and competition: Christians and Muslims know themselves called to witness in the whole world to the truth they have accepted in faith. Also they both make utmost efforts to spread and invite others to allegiance to the message of their respective faith communities. This is a situation of competition and mutual challenge. It has today assumed global dimensions. The adherents of both religions are spread out and connected over the entire globe; they are neighbours everywhere on the globe. Viewed in this way, each human being is "potentially" Muslim or Christian.¹

¹ Siehe Christian W. TROLL, "Witness Meets Witness: The Church's Mission in the Worldwide Encounter of Christian and Muslim Believers Today", in: *Encounters. Journal of Inter-Cultural Perspectives* 4 (1998), 15-34.

It would seem to be important for the benefit of all, that Christians and Muslims in their respective obligation to witness to their faiths, fulfil their missionary obligation in such a way that it genuinely serves peace and justice everywhere.

Furthermore, both Christians and Muslims relate to other religions, and all religions relate to one another as neighbours with the "third " partner, the secularised, doubting, agnostic, and often even atheistic individual and group. Secularism and non-religious interpretations of the world menace religious faith not only from without but also from within. Thus Christian-Muslim relations are decisively co-shaped by this factor.

Between the Islamic and the Christian doctrines of faith there exist significant common points. However, it would seem important to be aware simultaneously of their differences and their deep roots. The differences have to do with the content and interpretation of the foundational texts and the respective life model of the founder, Muhammad of Mecca and Jesus of Nazareth. These foundational texts and models imprint upon all single statements of both religions, which frequently resemble one another to the point of being almost interchangeable, an unmistakable, proper stamp.² Furthermore, it would seem to be of great importance to take measure of the weight, if not the

² Siehe Christian W. TROLL, Umstrittener Islam: Der Islam im Verständnis der katholischen Theologie, in: Thomas BROSE (Hg.), *Umstrittenes Christentum. Glaube – Wahrheit – Toleranz*, Berlin 2002, 104–130.

burden, of the encounters between Christians and Muslims in the course of history and to discern the economic, political and military factors at work in them. We should also not forget in these days to point out the world-wide interdependence in the relations between Muslim and Christian majorities and minorities and to plead effectively for true justice and properly understood reciprocity in mutual relations.

2. Catholic teaching on Mission today

With the following remarks we wish to indicate significant perspectives in the contemporary Catholic understanding of mission. They are based throughout upon central documents of the Second Vatican Council, relevant recent papal encyclicals as well as announcements of regional Episcopal conferences and Mission consultations. The exposition here follows closely parts of the new statement on Mission published in 2005 by the German Bishops conference.³

2.1. The mission of Jesus Christ as foundation and motive of the Missionary vocation

The gospels of the New Testament end with the sending out of the disciples by the Risen Lord. Thus, for example, Jesus at the

³ siehe: Deutsche Bischofskonferenz, *Allen Menschen Sein Heil* (Bonn, 2005), Teil II, Weltmission im theologischen Profil, passim.

end of the Gospel according to John sends his disciples with the following words: "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you" (Jn 20, 21). Jesus strengthens them in their task to be his witnesses by bestowing upon them the power of the Holy Spirit. This mission, entrusted to the apostles and through them to the whole Church, comprises the proclamation of the Good News as well as healing and forgiving action. The gospel according to Matthew recapitulates the command to universal mission thus: the Risen Lord assembles his disciples on a high mountain and gives them an order which transcends all ethnic and geographical frontiers, because God's redeeming action concerns all human persons without exception: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Mt 28, 19 f.).

So world mission means to cross frontiers on the way to others and to witness and proclaim the gospel to them – with respect for their identity – in such a convincing manner, that they know themselves to be invited to follow Jesus and accept his Gospel.

2.2. Mission as service of freedom

The Gospel is a “message of freedom and a power for liberation” (*Libertatis conscientia* 43). Hence, standing up for human dignity, for human development and for integral liberation belongs to the mission of the Church. It determines the content as well as the manner of execution of her mission. Whatever expands real freedom, as for instance the supply of basic material goods, the practice of human rights, a just and ecologically careful economic order, the protection of life and family, an ethically responsible shaping of globalisation – all this belongs to this mission.

These services, on the part of individual Christians as well as of Christian communities and of the whole Church, essentially belong to the missionary task, because „Christ personally in the poor calls his disciples to love with a loud voice” (*Gaudium et Spes* 88). Now, shaping political and social reality naturally is in the first place the task of the national and the international community of peoples; however, the Church has been commanded expressly by her Lord, to be advocate of the poor. Without the effective love of neighbour that aims at serving the marginalised and the disadvantaged, the love of God is vain: “Since whoever does not love the brother whom he can see, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 Jn 4,20).

2.3. Dignity of the person and human dignity

Integral evangelisation addresses men and women as human beings of freedom and recognises their dignity as persons. Whereas error and sin have to be opposed, all women and men without exception demand respect and love. History teaches us, that, if the dignity of each human being does not remain the absolute criterion, struggle against error and sin almost inevitably turns into struggle against erring and sinful humans. Normally even the slightest concessions to the well-observed penchant of distrusting freedom and curtailing the basic rights has dangerous consequences, especially in cases where instruments of power are available. This experience clearly speaks for the separation of religion and state.

Christian missionary initiatives are Christian only if and when they respect the other as a free subject. No means must be employed that in any way would disrespect human conscience and liberty. From past and present we know how much human dignity and human rights are an endangered species as it were. Hence the mission of the Church is essentially bound up with the defence and furthering of universal human rights. Viewed in a Christian perspective, these are founded in the fact that the human person is created according to the image of God (vgl. Gn 9, 6). Human rights follow from and are the minimal guaranties of the dignity of the human person. They were not simply invented by the

European enlightenment but rather have their deeper roots in the faith and message of the Judeo-Christian Biblical tradition.

2.4. The enculturation of the Gospel

The guiding missionary idea of enculturation is that Christianity inevitably is being realised in one or the other cultural constellation. A "culture-less", "pure" Christianity and a "religion-less", "pure" culture do not exist. Religious cultures encounter one another by way of give and take. In this process they are mutually purified and transformed. In this sense Vatican II stresses: „that whatever is found sown in the minds and hearts of men or in the rites and customs of peoples, these not only are preserved from destruction, but are purified, raised up, and perfected for the glory of God.“ (*Lumen gentium* 17). The recognition of the otherness of the religious person or community encountered, in the light of the Gospel, always goes together with unconditional respect, since there, too, "goodness and truth" are found as gift of God (vgl. *Lumen gentium* 16). However, this encounter of the cultures also comprises criticism and rejection, if and when certain religio-cultural traditions, as for instance the Indian caste system or certain provisions of Islamic Law, restrict human rights or real spaces of freedom.

In this sense, enculturation means the integration of the Christian experience into the culture of other people. Here this experience,

which is already shaped culturally, should express itself not only in elements of the other culture, but also become a power, which revivifies this culture, orientates and renews it. In this way enculturation contributes to a new synthesis, by which culture and Church are enriched. The countless metropolises and megalopolises of Asia, Africa and South America are, as it were, "laboratories" of the future. Since Christianity had its beginnings as an urban religion, the chances are good to find or invent today the appropriate forms for urban evangelisation. Furthermore, "modern Areopaguses" challenge the Christian, to carry the faith to the marketplace. Such places today are the media and also international fora, where in conversation and shared study one struggles for peace and economic development, for individual human and peoples' rights, for the protection of the biosphere and the promotion of women. The internationally organised sciences also are places, where the Gospel should be made known in appropriate ways.

3. Serving the truth

3.1. The relationship to other religions

The relatively new experience of adherents of different religions living common citizenship within one nation or region and the rapidly intensifying global mobility and networking pose – on the practical as well as theoretical level – great challenges to

Christianity. Which religion is the „true“ religion? Or, does such a question make any sense, and does religious truth exist in the plural, so that all religions would be equally valid and, in consequence, it ultimately does not matter to which religion one adheres? Do all humans in the images and rites, precepts and convictions that form part of particular religions, ultimately seek the same basic ground of all things? Should we, therefore, today cease to seek the truth in the individual religions? Does history not teach us, that religions can be politicized and fanatically charged? Is Christ really the sole and universal mediator of salvation? Cannot other religions also be ways to genuine salvation? Does it not seem to follow from tolerance that we let each one find his or her salvation according to his or her own fashion?

Such questions deeply move many contemporaries and hence demand existential answers. They touch the personal identity of faith and the missionary consciousness of many. Human persons are led to the moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth, and to adhere to the truth, once they come to know it and to direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of truth (cf. the Declaration of Vatican II about Religious Freedom). Furthermore, these questions ask for a reasonable theology of religions. Such a theology will have to do justice, within a Christian vision of faith, to the truth of the faith in Jesus Christ as well as to the elements of truth found in all religions as

well as in the human person. (see the 1996 document of the International Theological Commission, *Christianity and the religions*).

Today we are evermore conscious of the responsibility to contribute to world peace through peace between religions. Vatican II demands of the Church not less than "to minister the Gospel of peace to all mankind" (*Unitatis redintegratio* 2). The Church has, on a worldwide level, possibilities for contributing to reconciliation and to peace. The „service of reconciliation“ (2 Cor 5, 18), applied to the relationship between religions, certainly belongs to the essential tasks of the mission of the Church.

Since religious freedom is a human right, the Church does not only claim it for herself, but insists and works for that right to be fully respected, in regard to all religions. Religious freedom does not imply a restriction of missionary freedom, but rather aims at securing it. Vatican II states unambiguously the basic principle that faith can only be accepted with free assent: "Truth can impose itself on the mind of man only in virtue of its own truth, which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power" (*Dignitatis humanae* 1).

During the Second Vatican Council the Church has reflected anew about her relationship to other religions. She has defined this relationship in new ways. Which insights underlie this reassessment?

The first point is to note that all human beings and cultures belong to one another within the one community of peoples: "They expect from the religions and cultures a response to the fundamental questions of human existence" (see *Nostra Aetate* 1). The second point consists in the discovery "with gladness and respect" of "those seeds of the Word which lie hidden among the religions and cultures", as the Council expresses it, using an image of the Fathers of the Church (cf. *Ad gentes* 11). However fragmentary and broken these „rays of the truth“ in the non-Christian religions may be, they have to be accepted as signs of a hidden presence of God. Because „the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions“ (*Nostra Aetate* 2).

This conception follows from the Church's understanding of herself. She acknowledges that "many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its [own] visible confines." (*Lumen gentium* 8). The Church also esteems these elements as gift of God and as preparations for the Gospel (cf. *Lumen gentium* 16). Hence, if in the context of the human quest for salvation truth can be recognised, then members of other religions who are guided by this faith and who seek God with a sincere heart, follow the call of their conscience and obtain salvation.

The recognition of „truth and grace“ (*Ad gentes* 9) in non-Christian religions is bound up with the critical “discernment of the spirits”. A critique of religions guided by the values of the enlightenment and by the correct use of reason would seem especially needed, if and when making an ideology of, and absolutising finite realities (e.g. race, class, money or power) become widespread, and if and when such realities as nature, cosmos or the annual cycle are loaded with pseudo-religious meaning and/or when religion is instrumentalised for the justification of political power or even violence.

The peaceful and dialogical *convivencia* of the religions includes criticism whenever human rights are offended and freedom of religion is withheld. Freedoms must not only be claimed for oneself but also be granted to others. One may think here of the rights granted to Muslims in the countries of Europe and the simultaneous withholding of freedom of religion from Christians living in certain Muslim-majority countries. We are talking here in fact about the “Golden Rule”, well-known in many cultures and religions. In the Gospel according to Matthew it is formulated in the following way: „So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the Law and the Prophets“ (Mt 7,12). In the context of dialogue we might phrase the Golden Rule in this way: Try to understand and treat others in the way you would like to be understood and be treated by them. In any case, however, Christians must and cannot make the way of their acting

dependent on the good behaviour of the others, especially in long-distant places.

3.2. The truth of Jesus Christ in inter-religious dialogue

The recognition of religions and their critical assessment for Christians has as its ultimate criterion Jesus Christ, the one and universal mediator of salvation. „The most intimate truth which this revelation gives us about God and the salvation of man shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation“ (*Dei verbum* 2). To be a Christian in the first place means to arrive at a personal relationship with Christ and to answer the Word of God in faith. The woman or man who enters into his discipleship, will find many others on the same path who through baptism are made members of the pilgrim “people of God” and the “body of Christ”.

In Jesus Christ, the son of man and the son of God, who „once and for all“ (Heb 9, 12) has wrought salvation, historical uniqueness is linked with universal meaning for the salvation of each and every person. Through his proclamation in word and deed of the Kingdom of God and through his offering of himself on the cross, he has gone the way to God who has raised him from the dead. Thus he can proclaim truthfully: „I am the Way; I am Truth and Life“ (Jn 14, 6). As such he remains accessible for us in the Holy Spirit, beyond all the limits of space and time, and he

can in other religions and cultures be „touched“, „encountered“ in ways unknown, for instance when a person genuinely offers mercy and love to any one of his suffering brothers and sisters (cf. Mt 25, 36-40). The Church's claim to truth has its origin and source in the belief that no human being is excluded from the universal reach of the love of God.

If what has been stated is true, why does the Church all the same owe to the other religions the express witness to Christ? Because God wishes to encounter as concretely and immediately as possible the concrete person in her personal search for salvation, in suffering also and even beyond death. For this reason God becomes in Jesus of Nazareth a human being as we are, equal to us in all except sin. Beyond all the prophetic words of his messengers and above all the insights of the sages and the experiences of the mystics, God assumes a human face in order to make available to men and women the gift of his friendship. In the word of Jesus to his disciples, God speaks to all who trust in this word: „I shall no longer call you servants [...]. I call you friends“ (Jn 15, 15)). The nearness and care on the part of God corresponds to the reliability of his promises of salvation.

The Church is asked to invite all human beings to this unique friendship with God. Because only through the friendship with God does the restless heart that seeks “life in its fullness” find rest. Men and women of all cultures have a right to hear this existential

truth of the Gospel. And, at the same time, it is our duty not to deceive them with regard to the truth. A more precious service we cannot render them.

In the context of the various religions and their teachings, the proclamation of this truth of the Good News includes the dialogical encounter with adherents of other religious traditions. Inter-religious dialogue is an absolute necessity for a peaceful and reconciled living together of the various religions. Dialogue constitutes an integral element of the missionary command: Go out to all nations. Dialogue does not however render redundant the proclamation of the message of Jesus Christ and the universal significance of salvation through him. Already the Second Vatican Council „urged“ the members of the Church „to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions... [and] while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.“ (*Nostra aetate* 2).

4. Conclusion

For many in our part of the world religion has become a private matter to such an extent, that one hardly speaks anymore about it. But Christians are not allowed to wait until people take the initiative to seek conversation about God and the world. They

must go out to encounter them and be present in their lives with the message of Christ. Faith lives by witnessing and communicating: Why am I a Christian? What is the basis of my faith and hope? What keeps us on the path of Jesus even against the trend of our time and society? The art of missionary action consists in inviting others to faith from the heart and in this not forgetting that the answer to God's invitation is a matter of ultimate relevance. We may also ask: Do only those who believe have to justify themselves? What does the one who does not believe, believe in? What damage comes about, where one thinks one can do without God? One has to justify also the "without God" and has to keep in mind all the consequences of this option for the future of our society" (see *Allen Völkern Sein Heil*, 53).

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