



50 years Vatican Council II – Remembrance and obligation

The Panorama of the multi-religious reality

The history of religions is as old as the history of mankind. Religions are a reflex response of the love story between God and humanity. God always sought after human beings; and they, in turn, attempted to respond according to their respective insight and comprehension. This is the genesis of the vast number of coexisting religions.

“In the past there has been hardly any confrontation between these religions on the level of their teachings. That was admittedly different in the Catholic Church. She understood herself as the only true way to salvation. This self-image determined the Church’s attitude and her relationship towards other religions. She believed that the followers of other religions could only be saved through conversion to Christianity. Conversion, therefore, was the priority goal of the christian mission. But with time, other world religions also claimed responsibility for the salvation of the whole world. A growing confrontation was the result.” (CCFMC Lesson Unit 15 A)

A first attempt to resolve these tensions was made in Chicago in 1982 in the „World-Parliament of Religions“. On this occasion, representatives of all religions attempted to “further mutual understanding and to foster the spirit of partnership among the religions of the world.” This was a viable starting point for an inter-religious dialogue.

Yet another impetus was II Vatican Council by accepting the other religions as legitimate ways of salvation and thus opening doors for a dialogue among leading world religions. Within her new understanding of the relationship with other religions, the Church now spoke of the “working of the Holy spirit also in other religions“. The incarnation of God was basic proof of how God interrelates with mankind; and drew from it new conclusions for the relationship of religions among themselves. What caused the Church’s surprising change of thinking and acting is demonstrated by the following contribution in memory of II Vatican Council, written by Jan Hoerberichts. St. Francis played a crucial role in this.

We have to accept that there are many religions and that they all have their own world-views. From that we have to assume that the “diversity of religions is not a mere unfortunate accident in God’s creation. Just as in the case of the rest of creation the complexity and the variety makes beauty possible, the multiplicity of religions means the real gateway to the truth in God’s healing mission (H. Schalück OFM) Therefore, all religions, from their very own self-image are able to add a small pebble to the mosaic of the total truth. Understood thus, common issues can grow from the discovery that all religions with their richness and their weaknesses and inadequacies are ways to encounter with the infinite and that everyone is on his/her way to help people so that their service for God will also turn into a service for humanity. This is the best way for a better inter-religious understanding.

They are all seeking answers to the questions of human existence, however, with diverse clarity. “The claim for ultimate truth is portrayed in Judaism, Christianity, Islam as well as Buddhism. While Confucianism regards ancestors as the uppermost entity for the behaviour and the success of community, the Jewish-Christian tradition proposes a God, who is understood as a person; Hinduism is marked by individual Gods and Buddhism searches for the oneness with the cosmos, where human existence and the human community are included.” (O. Noggler OFM Cap)

If people meet each other this way, and if they regard themselves as the creatures of the sublime God, if they are aware of their responsibility before this sublime God whom they address with different names, or not mentioning his name due to respect and wisdom, they will no longer kill each other. On the contrary, they will be prepared to live in peaceful co-existence. Francis is the permanent role-model for this behaviour. To this day his encounter with the Sultan is a valid example of a reverential dialogue between believers of different origins.

Andreas Müller OFM



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The council has asked the Religious Orders to return to their sources. The CCFMC is a fruit of this responsibility. Thousands of sisters and brothers of the Franciscan family in the whole world are gathered together in an intercultural dialog regarding what the Franciscan spirituality has to say for our time. Fifty years after the beginning of the council we want to show, with lived examples, how highly relevant and explosive this is today.

Francis and the Declaration of Vatican II *Nostra Aetate*

Jan Hoerberichts, Holland



After centuries of enmity and strife between Christianity and Islam,, the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (October 28, 1965) presents a surprisingly positive image of Islam: 'The Church has a high regard for Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth... They strive to submit themselves without reserve to God's hidden decrees, just as Abraham did to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not recognizing Jesus as God, they worship him as a prophet; his virgin mother they also honor... Further, they await the Day of Judgment... Hence they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, almsgiving and fasting' (3).

How did this dramatic change come about? First we must recall that at Vatican II many bishops of African and Asian churches were present. In their dioceses they were daily confronted by people of different faiths that, already before the coming of Christ, had inspired millions of people to lead an upright life. These bishops could not go home without the council having answered their problem of the value of these faiths in light of God's universal salvific will. Were these people saved by God despite, or thanks to the faithful observance of their religion?

A second reason, especially relating to the praise of Islam, is the influence of Louis Massignon, an Arabist and Islamologist (1883-1962). He had a great love for Francis and admired his peaceful approach to Islam. In 1931 he joined the Third Order of St Francis and took the name Ibrahim (Abraham), the father of the three Abrahamic religions. He was a good friend of Card. Montini who as Pope Paul VI promulgated the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* which incorporates many of the insights in Islam that were dear to Massignon. Thus 'Massignon contributed towards changing Christian-Muslim relations from a sterile and destructive confrontation to a fruitful dialogue and co-operation in service to the one God of all humankind' (Christian Troll).

This positive change would certainly have been welcomed by Francis. But we can only guess what would have happened if the church had woken up much earlier and had accepted Francis' peace mission to the sultan as common church policy. Unfortunately Francis did not have a curial friend who was sympathetic to his ideals of peace. On the contrary, Pope Gregory IX, who as Card. Hugolinus had been the protector of the order and called himself a friend of Francis, was deeply involved in organizing a new crusade. He too appointed the first brothers as crusade preachers: a policy against which the leaders of the order, like Bonaventure, did not object.

What were Francis' motives for following such a different approach? He had fought in Assisi's war against Perugia and been taken prisoner. After spending a year in an underground dungeon, he returned to Assisi, physically broken and mentally depressed. After much thinking he began to see that the frequent wars in his world had to do with the desire for power and possessions: Assisi wanted to be greater, richer and more powerful than Perugia. And so did the pope in his continuous fights with the emperor. In this strife human lives did not count. Francis' view on society was confirmed when he lived for some time among the lepers. How could a city waste so much money on buying weapons, strengthening its walls and fighting its wars, and at the same time treat its lepers in such inhuman ways, burying them alive in a leper house out-



side the city. Francis did no longer want to be part of such a violent society, and decided to 'leave the world.'

These reflections had made Francis' mind and heart receptive to hear well-known gospel texts afresh, in a new and challenging way. Thus, one day when he heard the story about Jesus sending his disciples on a mission of peace (Lk 10), he felt Jesus challenging him personally to do the same. And when God gave him brothers, he wrote it down: The brothers must go through the world without possessions and without a stick to defend them. As soon as they enter a house, a leper house or an almshouse, a farmhouse or a workshop, the first thing they do is to wish the people peace, not just in words, but by offering them their services. And at the end of the day, they sit with them at table, eating and drinking what is set before them, thus forming one table fellowship: the crown on their early wish of peace' : (cf. RegNB, 14,1-3).

In 1212 - 800 years ago this year! - Francis decided to extend his peace mission to the world of Islam. It is a very turbulent year in which the future of Christianity in Spain is at stake. And when in August the decisive battle is won, the pope is jubilant. This victory proves that God is now on the side of the Christians. Already the next year he announces a new crusade. As a man of peace, Francis does not share the pope's rejoicing and boards in September a ship to take him to the sultan. Unfortunately, a storm prevents him from reaching his goal. Francis finally succeeds in 1219 when the fifth crusade is at its climax. Despite the objections of the papal delegate, Francis persists in his peace plan and goes to the sultan, not knowing what will be awaiting him, for the crusade propaganda had portrayed the sultan as a 'cruel beast'! But Francis was received well and, to his great surprise, he discovered that the Muslims were not the unbelievers they were told to be, but believing people whose life of faith and prayer greatly impressed him.

Francis returns to Italy a changed man. He cannot hold to himself what he has seen and experienced. He starts writing letters urging the clergy to promote reverence not only for the Eucharist, as the Lateran council (1215) had asked, but also for 'the written names and words of our Lord', as he had witnessed among the Muslims, who give their Koran a place of honor and recited with great devotion the ninety-nine beautiful names of God. He also writes to the custodians, the leaders of the fraternity, and to the mayors of the cities, expressing his wish that they introduce the Muslim call to prayer in order that 'through all people in the whole world always at every hour praise and thanks be given to almighty God'. The accumulation of different words with a universal intent gives the text an almost ecstatic ring which underlines its visionary character. Francis dreams of what Leonard Lehman has aptly called 'a Christian-Muslim *Oikoumene* in Praising God', not only in words, but especially also in deeds. Through their mutual commitment to live together in peace, Christians and Muslims can make this world of ours, our i, truly a house of God where all God's people are welcome.

The decision of John-Paul II in 1986 to invite the leaders of different faiths to Assisi for a World Day of Prayer for Peace fits well with the vision Francis had developed when he lived *among* the Muslims and was able to break down the prejudices that the church fostered because of its fight *against* them. I think, however, that he would have found it a pity that, at the World Day of Prayer held last year to commemorate the 25th anniversary of John-Paul's initiative, the representatives were only given the opportunity to pray for one hour privately in their rooms. Wouldn't he have loved the prayer of all people gathered from all over the earth to have sounded in Assisi giving praise and thanks to almighty God for all the good gifts God in his gracious love bestowed on all of them? And what about the suggestion of a rabbi that next time the various leaders be not only present at each other's prayer as they were in 1986, but really pray together by saying together the Prayer of Peace, attributed to Francis: 'Lord, make me a channel of your peace'?