

# **Unto Him you will all return**

An Inter-Religious Message for Easter

The following considerations arise from the reflections at the conference of February 18 2009 chaired by Father Christian W. Troll S.J. at the PISAI in Rome on “Dialogue and Truth-claims in Christianity and Islam”; the President of CO.RE.IS. (the Italian Islamic Religious Community), Shaykh 'Abd al Wahid Pallavicini, was present.

The occasion was the opportunity to reconsider some of the themes already addressed by CO.RE.IS. in the past that, today, we would like to re-propose, aware of the importance of their content and their “original” and “atypical” nature in the current landscape of interreligious dialogue.

The central question of interreligious dialogue is whether we can recognize the Truth in other religions while remaining completely faithful to our own. We want to state here, as Muslims, that this is possible and that it is also possible to recognize the full and entire Truth and the validity of salvation of all orthodox religions, while, of course, practicing only one of them, without confusion or syncretism. It is enough to understand that this unity of the Truth is neither merely formal, nor a matter of language, but descends entirely from the mystery of God, who has providentially willed that religions be different, as are men themselves.

There is only one true religion: the Truth itself, shown and revealed by God at several times and places, in many forms, for different communities, as the Holy Koran says in the passage cited by Professor Troll: “Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try by that which He hath given you. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.”(Koran V, 48). Pope John Paul II wanted to give a meaningful echo to this passage from the Koran during his visit to Casablanca in 1985, when, referring to our differences, he said: "There is a Mystery about which God will enlighten us one day, of this I am sure."

What prevents the majority of men today from always and everywhere accepting the Truth in the name of an alleged and illusory "freedom" is the loss of this sense of Mystery and the consequent claim to be master and owners of “their own” ideas, of “their own” religious forms and “their own” theological expressions. If, instead, men were to remain open to the infiniteness of divine teachings, they would discover, in the apparent contradictions between the various "dogmatic" expressions, a sign of Divine Mercy and a test for Mankind.

The cause of the problems of Christianity today, or perhaps especially of Catholicism, to accept the divine origin and the saving worth of other orthodox religions (i.e. maintaining conformity with metaphysical doctrine) resides in the current way of conceiving the theological expression in the historical and anthropological sense, almost forgetting the universality of the metaphysical principles upon which this term was originally founded and, without which, is reduced to an empty formalism. In Islam there was something similar when excessive development of legal science (*fiqh*) and speculative theology (*ilm al-kalâm*) led, in one direction, to literal interpretation and, in the other, to exclusivity, resulting in an impoverishment of religion in both cases.

Today, because of these respective deviations, Christians and Muslims, insisting on making absolute these forms of expression of the sacred, have great difficulty in remembering that they are not an end in themselves, but rather a means of spiritual elevation, a language used to refer to that which transcends them. The purpose of religion is to bring men to God and that purpose is inherent in Creation itself. From the beginning of the world, providential means to lead men to salvation and to knowledge of Him have never been lacking.

The multiplicity of forms is not only in the variety of rites and dogmas professed and practiced by different civilizations, but also inside every religious world itself, as in the experience of every man, who often struggles to recognize divine Providence in the contingencies of life. In part, this variety is the reason why the dialectic has continued for centuries: for example, between the supporters of anthropomorphic symbols and aniconism, and even iconoclasm. But these are two complementary approaches that refer to the dimensions of Divine Transcendence and Immanence which are needed to properly relate to God and to be able to love and know Him in His highest form, "Have of God your highest conception" says an important *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad.

It is precisely this conception of the absolute quality of God that should induce Man to submit to His Will, and this is the meaning of the word "Islam". The form of this name in the sacred language of revealed Arabic draws the believer to an active rather than a passive dimension, who then must be ready to harmonize his own will with the Will of God. This necessarily involves a cognitive dimension: to be able to do the will of God in every moment, we must be able to discern it. This discernment must necessarily pass through the providential guides given to man; that is, the daily practice of religious rites, the acquisition of virtues by following the example of the Prophet (*sunna*) and obedience to Holy Law (*shari'a*). These are the aids to orthodox religious practice that allow true communication - or communion – of the Muslim with the Word of the Koran, which is recited during the five daily prayers and put into practice in every religious activity.

In Islam, the Holy Koran has the name of *al-Furqân*, "discernment", and it is this ritual participation in the revealed Word which enables the faithful to overcome their individual peculiarities, adhering to the model of perfection of the Prophet and therefore taking on his spiritual qualities that transcend the individual. The root of the word *islâm* refers instead to True Peace, *as-Salâm*, which is a Name of God, a result of and a means towards that submission: "Thou soul at peace! Return unto thy Lord, content in His good pleasure! Enter thou among My bondsmen! Enter thou My Garden!" (Koran LXXXIX, 27-30).

The relationship between subjugation and freedom and, ultimately, between Truth and freedom is also the central theme of Professor Troll. In fact, the believer is free to be part of the divine promise of an immeasurable reward in Eternity, and therefore act according to divine Law. In this regard, it is important to remember that Eternity and the superior worlds are not just part of a "future promise", but are also situations that are always present and immanent where Man, the more he distances himself from religious conformity, the more he is unaware and unable to benefit. Has not the Prophet Muhammad said: 'Heaven is nearer to everyone than the lace of his shoe and it is the same regarding Hell'?

What has been said about Islam is no less true for other religions: if the path to holiness in Christianity has always passed through the *Imitatio Christi*, the eminent example of Christ is his acceptance of the Will of God; in the words spoken in the Garden of Olives, where his intimate conversation with the Lord says: "But it is not my will, but Thy will" (Luke XXII, 42). Moreover, in the Koranic revelation, the words of baby Jesus, presented to the people by his mother, begin with the affirmation *Inni 'Abdu-llâh* - "in Truth I am the Servant of God." Moreover, according to Koranic teaching, there is no son of Adam who did not attest his submission to the Creator at the beginning of time, as revealed in the *sura Al-A'râf*: "And (remember) when thy Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, (saying) : Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, verily. We testify" (Koran VII, 172).

Spiritual evolutionism, which sees in the historical coming of Christ, the crowning of the whole of Creation and in the other Revelations, just "*semina verbi*", preparatory to Christianity itself, is simply a result of a modern deformation of certain traditional symbolic expressions that are also found in other civilizations and which relate to the fact that every man or religious community can only start on the path to God from the point where they find themselves. This point is, for them, the Centre, from which the divine descent that turns to them can only seem a crowning. In the oneness of Being, in Christ's warning, "the Kingdom of Heaven is within you", every man is called to recognize the Centre of reality as a starting point for the annihilation of himself before God. God revealed in the Koran: "We shall show them. Our portents on the horizons and within themselves until it will be manifest unto them that it is the Truth. Doth not thy Lord suffice, since He is Witness over all things?" (Koran XLI, 53).

Most people today are so permeated by certain exterior mental habits that they no longer even notice the limitations that these impose. Therefore an effort is needed to be able to see the reality beyond these veils and a sincere comparison with the brothers and sisters of other religious communities can certainly be helpful to maintain a proper metaphysical awareness. The hadith says: "The believer is the mirror of the believer" (Abu Dawud, 49), and the Koran: "And argue not with the People of the Scripture unless it be in (a way) that is better, save with such of them as do wrong; and say: We believe in that which hath been revealed unto us and revealed unto you: our God and your God is One, and unto Him we surrender." (Koran XXIX, 46).

The Holy Koran firmly confirms, for instance, the virginity of Mary and the fact that Jesus had no human father. Also, what was included into the Christian dogma of the Immaculate Conception (that is, the birth of Mary without sin) was already clear from the beginning of Islam, as reported by a *hadith*: "Satan touches every son of Adam on the day his mother gives birth to him, except in the case of Mary and her son" (Bukhari).

The Holy Koran says about this: "And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above (all) the women of creation." (Koran, III: 42).

The Imam al-Qushayri stresses that "the repetition of the special choosing (*istifâ'*) of Mary is interesting for two reasons. The first: "God has chosen you conferring on you excellence, a spiritual rank and an elevated position." The second: "He has elected and chosen you to carry within you 'Isa (*'alayhi-s-salâm*) without the intervention of a human father, and no woman has ever been and never will be equal to you until the end of time. Hence the expression "above all women of creation."

Finally, reflecting the strong presence of the figures of Jesus and Mary in Islam, we recall that the Prophet Muhammad, returned victorious to Mecca, whilst he destroyed the idols that were worshiped there, stretched out his hands as a sign of protection over the icon of the Virgin Mary and her son that was painted inside the Ka'aba, and the house of the Virgin Mary in Ephesus has always been a place of pilgrimage for Muslims as well. Very different is the fact that Islam necessarily must present a differing "theological" view, as these seeming contradictions vanish in God: theological terms such as "Son of God" for the Gospel, or "Spirit of God" (*Rûh Allâh*) for the Koran, do not become stumbling blocks for those who are willing to accept that God wanted to address men by means of differing languages and points of view ("If God had wanted, he would have made of you one community ...», as we saw before). Significantly, Christian heresies are born precisely from a literal interpretation of terms such as "Son of God", misinterpreting the meaning in an almost "naturalistic" and anti-metaphysical way. The Church's historical condemnations of these tendencies certainly do not concern the orthodox conception of the eternal Word, which "incarnates" in all the traditional forms, even if, in Christ, this identification was providentially expressed in human form.

So if we use the term 'metaphysical' to describe the doctrine of the Absolute and the primary principles beyond any form, it is to give back its etymological meaning to this term, beyond the philosophical speculations which have diminished its scope over the centuries. It is not to water down the approach to religions by overlaying them with a human philosophy, but, on the contrary, it is precisely the benefit inherent in the practice of religious rites that causes a clarification of man's mind and heart, which allows him to rise above physical forms. Rather, it has been modern philosophy that has defiled human reasoning to the point of polluting theological speculation itself and distorting the meaning of the word "metaphysics".

The assimilation of medieval Aristotelian philosophy and its terminology into Hebrew, Christian and Islamic fields was certainly not a sign of any desire to reduce the scope of the Revelation, but to calm minds through the creation of an appropriate language that did not have a profane source, in the light of modern opinion that sees Plato and Aristotle as *ante litteram* "free thinkers". True metaphysics is the knowledge that the Truth is One, Unchanging and Eternal, found in all Holy Scriptures, as Prof. Troll himself says in his speech, when he speaks of the "metaphysical dimension of the Koranic message" which can be known by man in any place and time of the Creation, because "wherever ye turn, there is the face of God" (Koran II, 115) and because "unto Him is the journeying" (Koran V, 18).

Man finds himself between the transcendence of divine Unity and the multiplicity of contingent forms. He can therefore conceive of the Infinite and the suprasensible only by means of sensible symbols that become a support base for his intellect that can, by analogy, understand everything that transcends imagination. All problems arise when Man forgets this and takes the sensible base, the symbol, for itself and in itself alone, falling into idolatry and *shirk*, the sin of "associationism" (for Islam, the real root of every sin) that is, associating the only Reality, the Absolute, with another presumed reality, be it spiritual or material.

It should be remembered that a symbol always depends on what is being symbolized, which remains, in principle, independent of the symbol that expresses it. In other words, the Revelations never exhaust the infinity of God and the richness of His Word, but show Him in different ways, by highlighting

some of His perfect qualities, in a succession of Revelations that will always be different, but will never contradict each other, at least not for those able to go beyond the appearances of the forms to see their essential common origin: “Say: Though the sea became ink for the Words of my Lord, verily the sea would be used up before the Words of my Lord were exhausted, even though We brought the like thereof to help.”(Koran XVIII, 109).

The Holy Koran records a long chain of prophets and messengers (*anbiyâ 'wa mursalûn*) from Adam to Muhammad, who, faithful to that one Truth that is God Himself, were the providential means by which He has adapted, to different times, places and peoples, that unique primordial Tradition whose content is: *lâ ilâha illâ Allâh*, “there is no god except God”, the One and the Same for all. These adjustments, which should not be intended as impoverishments or, even worse, betrayals of the Truth, are nothing but a succession of orthodox Revelations, to call men to worship the One God: “And verily We have raised in every nation a messenger, (proclaiming): Serve Allah and shun false gods.” (Koran XVI: 36). These revelations are all recognized and confirmed in their validity by Islam which is the seal (*khatm*), just as the seal of the Prophecy is Muhammad.

The Tradition is therefore one, as the Truth itself from which It comes and to which It leads, but the "traditional forms" which it takes from time to time are different: forms, to be sure, that are all "real" but also "relative" compared to the Absolute that is God alone, *Huwa-l-Haqq*, He is the Truth. “And Allah speaketh to mankind in allegories, for Allah is Knower of all things.” (Koran XXIV: 35). The Koranic Revelation considers the various revelations as just various symbols (*amthâl*) of the One Word of God which is beyond all created forms, the Word that was manifested to the Jews in the form of the Law (*at-Tawrâ*) for a chosen people, to the Christians in the form of Man in Christ (*al-Masih 'Îsâ ibn Maryam*) and to the Muslims in the form of a Book in the Holy Koran (*al-Qur'ân*).

In effect, it is the metaphysical dimension of the “Koranic message” that allows Islam to consider itself not as a new religion, but as an updating of the one Primordial or Axial Tradition (*ad- dîn al-qayyim*, or *dîn al-qayyima*), which goes back to the creation of Adam.

Christian Patristics does not ignore the essential identity of religious forms and their unity “on high”, that is, in God himself, considering them as reflections of a single source of light, the *nûr muhammadi*, or *Sophia Perennis*, as Christian scholars say. Based on this fundamental perspective, Saint Augustine was able to say that: "This that is now called the Christian religion, was also present among the ancients, and was ever present from the beginning of the human race, until Christ came into the world and, since then, the true religion which already existed, began to call itself Christian" (Retractationes I, 13.3).

Even Christians contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad reported that he declared that he had come to restore, "white and pure", the religion of Abraham, in the same way that Abraham had announced nothing but absolute Monotheism (*tawhid*) or the religion of pure worshipers (*din al-hunafâ'*, cf. Koran XCVIII: 5) as a statement of the existence of a single Principle for all things. The word *tawhid* is usually translated as "doctrine of the uniqueness of God" and shares the same root as the divine attribute, *al-Wâhid*, the Only One. Since God is indeed the One and the Only One, the *tawhid* is the source of every other specific doctrinal determination, the heart and the essence of religious doctrine. For this reason, it constitutes the fundamental and indispensable element of monotheism.

Every theological expression, every doctrinal formulation of any religion, would then lose all its legitimacy without it, since it is the connecting point between the doctrine of a specific religion and eternal, metaphysical, divine principles; is that vein which guarantees the orthodoxy and effectiveness of a religion, which otherwise would be reduced to a simple conventional belief that is entirely mental and entirely human.

*Tawhid* constitutes the vital element of a religious doctrine and allows it to be a vehicle and make a real spiritual presence accessible to men, a genuine communion with the One transcendent God. In fact, the Prophets and the Saints did not do any more than restore a right orientation towards the *tawhid*, renewing access to the higher divine Truth, wherever men had forgotten their Lord by losing themselves in their pseudo-doctrinal cogitations, by now cut off from divine life and no longer inspired by Him. Such symbols of sacred knowledge, the knowledge of which God is the only possessor (*al-'Alîm*) are not abstractions or products of human thought, but rather supports for the blessings of heaven and are vehicles for that Spirit through which they provide access, because their content is not human, but divine.

In conclusion, we thank you for the attention you have given us. We would be very interested to have your opinion in order to help overcome those constraints that prevent even the most skilled of our respective communities to collaborate effectively. As Pope Gregory VII wrote in a letter, dated 1076, to the Emir of Algiers: “There is a charity that we owe to one another more than to other peoples since we recognize and acknowledge One God, though it be in different ways, and we praise and worship Him every day as the Creator and Ruler of the world.”

These words of a Pontiff is particularly significant for us because it recalls the word of God, who in the Holy Koran says:

“Say: O people of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for Lords beside Allah. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered unto Him.” (Koran, Sura of the Family of 'Imran III, 64).

With the greatest of respect and esteem

the Italian Islamic Religious Community CO.RE.IS.  
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