

Ethics and Inter-religious Dialogue in a Globalized World
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What are the challenges emerging for ethics and inter-religious dialogue from the way things are in the “global village” today? I will first attempt to answer this question by way of metaphor, for metaphor’s various layers of meaning allow us to draw out the sense of what is afoot without banalising the complexity of the real situation. Using three “fluid” metaphors – shipwreck, liquidity, and seafaring – and one “solid” – the tower of Babel – I would like to outline what might possibly be the task of ethics and inter-religious dialogue in our globalized world.

1. It is Hans Blumenberg¹ who has used the metaphor of *shipwreck* as a tool to interpret the modern age and its crisis. The image refers back to a text from Lucretius, in whom the “condition humaine” in the “classic” era was to find its voice: “What a beautiful thing it is, when the winds clash over the sea, and the dark vastness of the waters churn beneath, to watch the distant shipwreck from dry land: it is not the other’s disaster that brings you joy, but the distance that separates you from a similar destiny”². This metaphor’s power derives from the way it counterposes the dry land, with all its steadiness and safety, and the fluid, inconstant sea: Lucretius’ spectators observe the scene of the shipwreck from the *terra firma* of their certitudes.

Modern observers, however, no longer enjoy such certainties; on the contrary, indeed, they experience the evident truth of Pascal’s words: “Vous êtes embarqués”³, we are all on board the ship! As Blumenberg comments, the steady vantage-point from which the historian can be a detached spectator no longer exists. What is new – beginning from the “age of lights” onwards – is that the observer is ever less to be distinguished from the shipwreck itself. Having lost the certainties offered us by positivism and the ideologies of the modern age, we have all been shipwrecked, heirs of modernity and dwellers in post-modernity.

Here we can grasp the far from secondary difference between the crisis of 1929 and that of the present day: then, the universe of ideological certainties presented itself as a feasible alternative to the crisis, like a rising sun. Today, following on the end of the ideologies and the collapse of the system of competing blocs, things are no longer thus. We are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on open sea. Our only hope of salvation lies in becoming a ship, with what remains of the wreck. On the great sea of history there continue to appear planks we can take hold of: but where do they come from? Maybe from earlier wrecks? Or from some totally other “elsewhere”? On the horizon of this scene of shipwreck, in which the spectators have themselves been thrown into the sea, a sense of expectation begins to emerge. In the question thus born of the shipwreck is perhaps to be found, in its most essential form, the currently sensed collective need for ethics and religious meaning.

2. The image of the ever restless sea recalls the metaphor of *liquidity*, employed with singular versatility by the British sociologist of Polish-Jewish roots, Zygmunt Baumann⁴. In our times, models and configurations are no longer “given”, and even less “axiomatic”: there are just too many

¹ *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer. Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1979.

² *De rerum natura*, II, 1-4.

³ *Pensées*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, éd. J. Chevalier, Paris 1954, n. 451 = 233 Brunschvig.

⁴ Cf. for example *Liquid Modernity*, Blackwell, Cambridge - Oxford 2000.

of them, they clash with each other, and contradict the commandments to which they refer, so that each of them has been deprived of a good measure of its power to coerce. It would be imprudent to deny, or even to minimize, the deep change which the advent of fluid modernity has introduced into the human condition. In the absence of dependable points of reference, everything seems fluid and, as such, justified or justifiable in relation to the passing wave of the moment. The very ethical parameters which the “great Code” of the Bible had entrusted to the West, now seem to have been diluted, and are no longer obvious nor readily at hand. The talk is of “relativism” and of “nihilism”, of “weak thought” and the “ontology of decline”.

With remarkable foresight Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died a martyr of Nazi barbarity in Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945, had grasped how such a situation was to challenge the ethics of the world which would be born from the ashes of totalitarianism: “Since there is nothing lasting, the foundation of life in history, which is trust, fails in all its forms”⁵. The human being drowns in the crowd of solitudes represented by the masses, and the dream of emancipation breaks against the wall of totalitarianism. “The master of the machine becomes its slave, and the machine becomes the enemy of man. Creatures rise up against their creator: a remarkable repetition of Adam’s sin! The emancipation of the masses issues in the terror of the guillotine... The path we have walked since the French revolution leads to nihilism”⁶.

This *liquidity* finds particular expression today in the volatility of the certainties promised by the “virtual economy” of international finance, in fact ever more separated from the real economy. Now that the mask of maximum profit for minimum risk has fallen away, we are left with the ruins of a fluid situation at all levels. To find points of reference, to indicate ways forward that can be trusted, is the titanic challenge facing those charged with government and administration. Economics, too, in its search for salvation, knocks at ethics’ door!

3. And yet, on the sea of history there appear other planks to hold on to, fragments allowing us to assemble a skiff still able to sail: what are they? I do not consider it unfounded to find here a metaphor for the meaning offered to human beings by the various *religious creeds*. The religions are summoned to the sickbed of “homo oeconomicus”. In their turn, they are challenged by the whole process of globalization, and so become aware of a new need to meet and work together.

Samuel P. Huntington⁷ identifies the challenge of the immediate future in the conflictual nature of this encounter: after the wars between nation-states which typified the 19th century, and those between ideologies characteristic of the 20th, in his view the 21st century will be marked by the clash of civilizations, themselves to be identified with the religious traditions in which they find inspiration. What needs to be established, therefore, is if and in what measure the religions can play a role in overcoming conflict and in building a new world order. Christianity and Islam, especially, are to be found at the heart of this debate, not only because of their links respectively with Western and Arab culture, but also because of the threat constituted by the alliance between some anti-Western movements and certain religious outlooks which claim to be founded on the Islamic faith. Yet no less important for the cause of peace is the role that could be played by Judaism and the great religions of Asia.

The challenge then is to choose between two models: “clash” or “covenant” between civilizations and religions. Certainly, the encounter between them cannot simply be a matter of juxtaposition. The alternative to the barbarity of total clash appears to be the possibility of “métissage”⁸: this confluence of multiple identities, certainly linked to the great migratory movements now under way, is no less related to that overcoming of distance achieved through the various means of communication, especially the internet. We refer here to the experience, hitherto unknown to the majority of people, of the encounter between very different identities, leading to the

⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, hrsg. E. Bethge, Kaiser, München 1966, 114f.

⁶ *Ib.*, 108.

⁷ *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World’s Order*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1996.

⁸ Cf. R. Duboux, *Métissage ou Barbarie*, L’Harmattan, Paris 1994.

formation of plural, nomadic, “mixed” identities, which at one and the same time are both self-assertive and flexible⁹.

The succession of events, from fateful 1989 to September 11, 2001 and what then followed, reveals the urgency of this challenge. We have moved from a world where frictions were fundamentally ideological to one where they are essentially a matter of identity. For many years to come this problem of identity will poison history, weaken intellectual debate, and spread hatred, violence and destruction on all sides. A basic choice has to be made: “métissage” has always been part of the history of peoples and cultures. The illusion of purity of identity and race is pure folly. If a culture is fully alive, it is also able to enter into a process of mutual exchange and reciprocal understanding with the identity of those who come to dwell within it. Certainly, this “assembling” is neither easy nor risk-free: what is decisive, though, is that persons and cultures come to recognize a code of common values, capable of serving as a basis for relations of mutual respect, mutual recognition, and dialogue. What might be the sources of such a code? And what might be the route for this boat put together on the seas of the great village?

4. An ethics founded on *Biblical revelation* offers a decisive possibility for defining such a code and helps to indicate the route to be followed. Such an ethics finds its fundamental point of reference in the centrality of the human person standing before the mystery of the living God. Beyond the shipwreck, on the waves of liquid modernity, the boat is now built together, with everyone agreeing to shared, stable and reliable rules, rooted in the dignity of the human being and in the binding nature of the moral imperative, making possible the voyage together across the wide sea towards the harbor – only ever glimpsed in hope and never fully reached in reality – of universal peace and justice for all. The notion of the absolute uniqueness of every human being provides the theoretical bulwark against every possible manipulation of persons, and grounds the recognition of their inalienable dignity.

Yet the recognition of this dignity also leads us back to its ultimate foundation: in this connection, we may be helped by a “solid” metaphor, the “tower of Babel”. Genesis 11 paints a picture of divisive confusion, originating from the split between the virtual - imagined or claimed - and the real, truly lived and at personal cost. The tower of Babel, though, offers another level of meaning, which escapes the majority of commentators, but already noticed by Voltaire, when he underlined that the name “Babel” means that “El” - God is father. Jacques Derrida draws out an important implication of this, when he observes that God punishes the builders of the tower “for having thus sought to make a name for themselves, to chose their own name, to build their own name, to unite themselves around this name as in a place which is at one and the same time a language, a tower, both the one and the other. He punishes them for having thus sought to generate for themselves a unique and universal genealogy”¹⁰.

The Babel metaphor stands to mean that the future of humanity does not lie in the cancellation of all differences, but in their ability to live together, in their mutual knowledge and acceptance, based on the common foundation of the absolute dignity of each human being before God, the only master of history. The great code constituted by the Decalogue translates this project into the commandment, call and impulse written deep in each person for the good of all. The God of the covenant is not in competition with human beings, but is that friend and neighbour who reveals and guarantees the dignity of the total humanity of every person. This is the God of Jesus Christ, the God who is love (cf. 1 Jn 4, 8.16). In the divine Logos made flesh is revealed not only the logos that underpins the world and all life, but also the plan of God’s love that precedes the world and goes into it gratuitously. In the global village, where the different religious traditions are called to dialogue, the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ offer a totally new horizon: that one of a possible, impossible love, impossible for our human strength alone, made possible by God’s drawing near, God with us, the eternal Emmanuel. To witness to this foundation, not against anyone

⁹ Cf. A. Maalouf, *Les identités meurtrières*, Éditions Grasset, Paris 1998.

¹⁰ *Des tours de Babel*, in *Aut Aut* 189-190 (1982) 70.

but out of love for all, to live it through the presence of the Risen in his Body the Church, is the task of Christian ethics also in this age of the global village and of the urgent need for a meeting of religions and civilizations, respectful of the differences. The Christian witness, given courageously “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4,2), offers light and help to the navigation of the human beings.

5. I would like to conclude these reflections by moving from the metaphors to the theses which underlie them. I will offer four such theses, by way of a proposal aimed at an ethics founded on biblical revelation, and capable - it seems to me - of speaking to the whole “global village”.

First thesis: *There is no ethics without transcendence.* There can be no moral action where the presence of the other is not acknowledged in all the depth of his or her irreducible difference. There can be no foundation for ethics without this acknowledgement: whenever we assert ourselves to such a degree as to deny the existence of others over against whom we are called to measure ourselves, we deny the very possibility of a choice between good and evil, and drown all difference in the deep ocean of our own solipsism. No one is an island! Beyond the ideologies and totalitarianisms of the modern era there is the need for an ethics of closeness and interpersonal relations: when we are shipwrecked on the great sea of history we need each other to bind together the single planks to which we hold!

Second thesis: *There is no ethics without gratuitousness and responsibility.* This movement of transcendence has a gratuitous and potentially infinite character: to relate to the other in terms of some selfish calculation is to empty moral decision of all value, rendering it a mere act of commerce or a simple exchange between equals. Here Kant’s teaching retains all its truth: either the moral imperative is categorical, and hence unconditional, or it does not exist. In this gratuitous and potentially infinite nature of ethical transcendence we grasp how it is always “an exodus from self without return” (Emmanuel Lévinas), and how at its very heart lies love, giving without counting the cost and without measure, by the unadulterated, radiant power of gift. When we are shipwrecked we will only find salvation together, in an act of mutual generosity, one to the other, and all of us to each one.

Third thesis: *There is no ethics without solidarity and justice.* In this same movement of transcendence, we experience the cluster of others surrounding our individual selves as the source of a complex network of ethical demands: to temper and reconcile these demands so that the gift made to the one does not become a wound to the other, or a barrier raised against him or her, means that we have to find a way of conjugating ethics with justice. As together we seek to regulate this network of the requirements of justice, we discover that we have to make sense of the notion of rights: it is not abstract, objective norms, nor a despotic authority, which provides law with its claim to be obeyed, but rather the urgent need to temper ethical relations, so that no such relation be to the exclusive advantage of some, or to the detriment of the dignity of others. Here an ethics of solidarity completes a mere ethics of responsibility, guarding the latter against the ever-present risk of an intemperate and fruitless absolutism of intention alone. The common good is the measure and norm of individual action, especially in the area of civil duties. Only thus can the boat be put together and sail towards an agreed destination!

Fourth thesis: *Ethics points us toward that free, sovereign, ultimate and absolute Transcendence which has first turned toward us.* When we recognize that this movement of transcendence towards the other, and the network of others in which we are placed, carry with them an inner, infinite call, another transcendence, ultimate and hidden, begins to take shape on the horizon: in the intimate yet penultimate transcendence we have already recognized we discover the footfall and memory of this greater transcendence. In others whose faces are familiar to us we meet the categorical imperative of that absolute love which comes to meet us, and in the absolute demand of solidarity towards the weakest we find an infinitely needful love that calls to us.

This absolute transcendence turned towards us, this absolute need for love, which calls to us in the very act of offering itself, opens us up to theological ethics: here the demand of being one-for-

the-other sends us back to a deeper and foundational relation with the living God, One in the mutual self-giving of the Three. Here the ethics of responsibility and of solidarity call us to the ethics of Grace, and to the communion of the Church, to whom this divine gift is entrusted to be shared and offered, particularly to the communion with those who have in the Church the responsibility of the magisterium, as it was authoritatively remembered by the Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* of Pope John Paul II (1993), and by the Instruction by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith entitled *Donum veritatis* (1990) on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian. Here our penultimate love leads us back to a love that is ultimate and sovereign, in the eternal interpersonal event of the one God in three Persons. Here, autonomy meets its founding and liberating heteronomy, and in the varied forms of our being one-for-the-other this possible-impossible love comes to tell its story in time: love “never ends” (1Cor 13,8).

Against this love will be measured the deep truth of our choices: at the evening of our lives we will be judged on love! The harbour towards which we sail the ship rebuilt on the sea of history is the future of the promise that at the end God will be all in all and the whole world will be God’s home. This future - of which the divine life shared in the Church is anticipation and promise - works on ethics like magnetism on the compass: the ethics of transcendence is inseparable from the ethics of love and of hope, founded on the promise of the faith that the God of the covenant has lit in the history of human persons. Thanks to this compass the boat will be able to find its way forward, and the sea of time - which touches every shore of the “global village” - will be able to flow into the ocean of eternity. In this sense, too, I like to understand the beautiful image attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, with which I conclude this reflection: “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea”.