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Religious and Cultural Tensions and their Overcoming in Contemporary World
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1. *General introduction.* It is a great honour and a great pleasure to have the opportunity to speak at the Ljubljana University. Thank you very much for this invitation. A great thank, above all, to Dean Komel, a great friend of mine, who is the intelligent and indefatigable organiser of many important activities here and abroad.

In my talk I will try to analyze the particular situation in which we are living today; today: in our contemporary world. In this world cultural and, above all, religious conflicts are in fact more and more widespread. It is a common experience. But it is not only a matter of fact. We cannot only describe and explain today's globalization of conflicts, for example, from a sociological, historical, or political point of view. In my opinion it is more important to discuss the mentality by which these conflicts are supported. It is necessary to understand the *logic* of conflict: the hidden reason by which conflicts can arise and can be argued.

This will be the aim of my talk. I will try to describe this logic. I will try to discuss some elements that can help us to understand our contemporary situation. I will try to outline another perspective which can show other solutions, other pattern of relationship: in which conflicts are not unavoidable.

I have divided my talk in 3 main parts:

[1] First of all, I would describe today's religious and cultural tensions, that is I wish to analyse some aspects of the so-called "return of religions" in contemporary world.

[2] My second step will be devoted to discuss what is precisely "religion" in our world, what do we mean with this term and – connected with this topic – how a fundamentalistic development of religion is possible. In a word: what is, which is the structure and how can arise fundamentalisms.

[3] The 3. and last step of my presentation shall be devoted to a more specific strategy to manage religious and cultural conflicts. I will speak about dialogue as a true form of communication. But how is it possible to develop a true communication among religious worlds? Which motivation shall be at the basis of this practice? How is it possible to use language for the sake of an agreement, of an understanding between religious men and women? At the end of my speech I will try to answer these questions.

2. *Today's religious and cultural tensions.* In our world again religious beliefs play a fundamental role in the make-up of a cultural group and of a society. This is due to the fact that religious beliefs give definition to a society as a whole, or better, to the

specific social group existing within it. This 'definition' consists in the shaping of behaviour, of one's way of thinking, and of common values, both in terms of the relationship between the human being and the Divine sphere, and that which regards the relationships between the human being and the world, others, and himself. In the first case, that is, the relationship between the individual and the One, we can consider religion – this will be dealt with more thoroughly later – in a strict sense, while, in the second case, the individual's relationships with the world, others, and himself have to do with the inherent ethical aspects of these religious beliefs.

However, it is not only in the spheres of religion and ethics that religious beliefs deeply influence a cultural group. One must take into consideration the *political* aspect that bears influence on culture. Religious beliefs, in fact, not only influence the cultural make-up of a society, but also interact with social institutions. Moreover, these beliefs usually lead to the creation of more specific institutions, which operate autonomously in society. For example, in Christian cultures, there are Churches, in Judaism, as far as the State of Israel is concerned, there are religious parties, and in Islam, there are various Religious Councils (such as the *ulema* Councils) or religious parties.

As it is often seen, these numerous interactions provoke tension on different levels. Let us list the various tension levels that can be encountered in present-day caused by the impact of religion present in society.

[1] First and foremost, let us look at the tension that exists *within the life of a religious human being* which takes into consideration one's beliefs, that is to say, that which one's religion imposes, and one's tendencies, one's preferences, one's 'nature'. We must note, that on this subject, when considering f. e. the three main monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), the religious human being is called upon to contrast a certain 'nature'. The orders imposed by God (the 'ten commandments' and the various precepts of these three religions) must be agreed to by the believers, who obey them, struggling against their tendencies and impulses. This is, by the way, the first and most generic definition of 'struggle', to which the Arabic word *jihad* refers: the struggle against anything that separates one from the obligation to one's divine duties, more important even than the 'holy war'.

[2] Secondly, there exists the tension that is created between the behaviour expected of a believer by a certain religion and the social behaviour expected in a group or in a community. In short, there is possible tension between *religious ethics* and *social ethics.* An example of this contrast may be the use if the Islamic veil (the *hijab*) in French schools (or more in general, in the French society).

[3] A further point of analysis is the tension between the political sphere and the conduct that is expected from a religious faith, even on a public level. This concerns mostly Western societies and their real claim to autonomy, which was progressively gained in the modern age and sanctioned by the French Revolution, as regards to the public impact of religions. It is in this perspective that the tension between the "*secular*" and the "*religious*" unfolds.

[4] Finally, tension arises from the contrast between *State institutions* and religious institutions, that is, from *Churches*. The entire history of modern Europe is marked by the process of separation of the State from the Church. This process is connected to the acquisitions of a great deal of ecclesiastic property by the State. Such an act is referred to as "secularization", that is, the passage to the *saeculum* of what was considered sacred (churches, convents, ecclesiastic property). Subsequently, the term "secularization" refers to, in a general sense, the loss of religious meaning in that which at one time was characterised by it (feast-days, places, human relations, etc…). It is typically said that, contrary to Europe, more specifically to Western Judaism and Christianity, *the Islamic world has not experienced*, in the modern era, the phenomenon of secularization. It is for this reason that, with the global spreading of Western values, some groups of Islam have had specific reactions that could be considered conservative or downright fundamentalist.

3. *Religious relationship.* So far, we have shown the interplay between culture and religion and the tensions that may arise. These tensions require deep and careful attention so that they can be controlled and managed. The various types of mediation and communication approaches, both on the intercultural and inter-religious levels, serve precisely this purpose, notwithstanding all of the problems involved. Nevertheless, we should be aware that if communication among different cultures and religions fails, if dialogue ceases, what is left is space only for indifference and violence.

However, before discussing this topic, we have to clarify what is religion, what is religion in its proper meaning, and what religions are and can be in our contemporary world. In order to answer the first question – What is religion? – it is necessary to start with a brief etymological digression. In fact: what is the origin of the term 'religion'? The Latin *religio* – hence 'religion' as it is termed in various European languages – particularly suggests two etymological meanings. Cicero's definition in *De natura deorum* (II, 72), where the term '*religio*' is related to the verb *relegere* which means diligently putting into practice that which is necessary to worship the gods, defining as religious those who carry out these deeds. In other words, this etymology highlights the constant repetition that marks certain types of deeds, emphasising the fact that religion is always tied to specific cultural and ritualistic practices. Ritualistic and ethical practices adequately develop in the political dimension of human beings.

The other etymology, that is even more engraved in our concept of religion is offered by Lactantius, a Christian writer in the *Divinae institutiones* three centuries after Cicero. In Lactantius's work (IV, 28) the term '*religio*' is made to derive from the verb *religare*. In other words, religion is shown as the attitude creating a specific bond – *religamen* – which connects human beings to God. Lactantius describes this bond as connected to *pietas*, as similar to the respect and the obedience that are due to the God of the Holy Scriptures. This way the aspect of public practice is left in the

background, while acceptance and preservation of the bond with God become very important.

These etymologies therefore identify two sides which are present in the religious practice: the public dimension of ethic and liturgical practice, that is emphasised by Cicero, and the inner character of that bond which through the experience of *pietas* unites human beings to God. Both, however, reveal and emphasize the specific character of a religious attitude: 'Religion' involves particular forms of relationship: relationship between God and human beings; relationship among human beings.

4. *Religious Fundamentalisms and their logic.* Religion expresses relationship. This is the proper meaning of the concept. But in our contemporary world this meaning seems to be forgotten. Another, opposite concept of 'religion' is widespread: religion as fundamentalism.

What is fundamentalism? In order to clarify this point, it is necessary to distinguish between two types of fundamentalism: [1] "legalistic-literalistic" and [2] "charismatic-utopistic".

[1] The first is related to the past. Its source comes from the sacred text, which is literally "the word of God". In so being, the text cannot be interpreted, but simply accepted. One is expected to obey that which is expressed in terms of precepts, duties and models of conduct. The past, therefore, weighs on the present and forces submission. The believer, in this case is literally, "subjugated".

[2] The second type of fundamentalism, instead, refers to an eschatological fulfilment, which, at the end of time will give salvation to only true believers. This view looks towards the future. In the present, a community guide, whose strong impact on the believers announces the fulfilment and gives the necessary guarantee. This gives way to further developments today, but only if one trusts in this prophet-like figure.

In reality, these two types of fundamentalism almost never co-incide in a pure form, but they are interlaced with one another and with the religious traditions on which they are founded. A common ground, however, can be identified. It can be identified in the common hidden logic of both types.

What is, in fact, the secret logic of fundamentalism? How do fundamentalisms originate? Where do they come from?

Essentially, the response to such questions can be found by considering the simple observation that, various religious contexts, even those which have undoubtedly *common aspects* – the sharing of sacred books, the common reference to a single God, the requirement of conduct dictated by compassion and love – are conceived and experienced *in different ways*. Each of these ways is considered to be the *only legitimate and suitable one* that leads to salvation. Therefore, this means that *one specific path,* one specific divine experience is assumed in many religious

contexts to be *immediately and necessarily valid for all people.* In this way, other paths, other interpretations are excluded. Synthetically, we are dealing with a series of steps that should be briefly explained:

[1] It is a universal value to have a specific religious perspective.

[2] By placing oneself at such a universal level through the application of various confirmation strategies, one puts aside that very peculiarity, that particular interpretation, from the initial position.

[3] Consequently, there is no longer a connection to *one* religious perspective *beside* another, but rather, *one and only true religion*.

[4] Therefore, it is necessary to establish and consolidate the identity of this religion, by defining what corresponds to the right doctrine and what does not.

[5] From this starting point, the relationship with those who do not accept this clearly-defined religion, whose right doctrine distinguishes it from others, is subject to either assimilation or destruction: the possibility to convince or the will to destroy.

It is here that we see the root of fundamentalism. The logic behind fundamentalism, in other words, is in its insistence on underlining elements of *exclusion* rather than elements of *convergence,* based on the conviction that one's own religion is immediately *the only right and suitable way* to interpret the relationships that a human being has with God, the world, and others.

5. *The Paths to Inter-religious Communication.* It is important to understand the 'logic' of fundamentalism if dialogue between religions is to be discussed as a necessary solution for overcoming conflicts. But, how is it possible to achieve this form of communication in a serious and effective way?

First of all, in my opinion, it is necessary to act *from within* each specific religious situation. It is necessary to appreciate all the elements present in each religion, that could help to overcome tensions and open up dialogue. It is necessary to regain the proper meaning of 'religion', the idea of relationship, and emphasize this aspect as the true core of the religious attitude. In other words, fundamentalism *cannot* be eliminated *from the outside*, but rather, *from within* the religious dimension: When one chooses to underline, on the part of the religious individual of various creeds, the common elements rather than the differences.

The second step is to support concretely these common elements. It is necessary to build together a common space, to make universality, to share our identity. Communication can help us.

But what is the meaning of 'communication'? What normally do we do in our practice of communication? What are we doing now, in the communicative interaction we are experiencing in this room?

Usually, in semiotics manuals and in linguistic treatises, communication as such is defined as the conveyance of a message (or information) by the 'addresser/sender' to the 'addressee' (or 'receiver'). Communication understood as

such, clearly requires elaboration by both the 'sender' and the 'receiver'. The former, in order to be understood, must give the message a form that is accessible to those who will receive it. The latter, wishing to understand, always tends to reconstruct the sender's intention, interpreting and contextualizing the message.

It is in fact believed that this communication pattern can work in managing processes that not only pertain to human beings, but extend to the different spheres in which information is conveyed, transmitted, and where it constitutes research grounds for specific disciplines, from sociology to biology, from politics to information technology.

In this way, inter-human communication is in danger of being restored to quantifiable standards, thereby sacrificing all which can, unlikely, be predetermined, such as creative ability and the capability of adapting to a set context.

This concept of communicating is certainly very common. But, we must insist, this *is not the only pattern* we should refer to when thinking of communicative processes. Something very different is at stake in these processes, verifying which is quite difficult; it has to do with adequately understanding what it means to implement the intermediation of a message or information. This is what the model of 'data transmission' takes for granted when interpreting what occurs amongst human beings, as simple interaction that can be measured in terms of efficiency and efficacy. Instead, it is the specific *mediation* which is at work in the communicative processes that must be investigated.

At this aim, we may be guided by a brief etymological analysis of the term 'communication'. As it is known, 'communication' derives from the Latin word '*communicatio*' which stands for 'to acquaint' others with what is in our possession. The clear metaphor in this notion is that of 'participation' which, not by chance, is explicitly offered by the German language: the word '*Mitteilung*' may be translated literally, rather than with the term 'communication', as it normally is, precisely with 'sharing jointly'.

Besides this, Latin offers something more. The reference of the term '*communicatio*' to the concept of '*munus*', as 'gift' is obvious. What is shared is, in the end, something which is given so that it can truly be common to all, so that everyone may take part. '*Communicatio*', therefore, originally means 'putting in common', 'creating a common space'.

What does all of this mean? It means that communication is not only transmitting messages. Communication is *creating a common space*, a shared space, within which the interlocutors can reach a true understanding. This type of understanding cannot be pre-determined, since it is the result, unforeseen and unforeseeably, of the ability to mediate that characterises the participants in the communicative process and that is applied, from time to time, to various contexts. In other terms, here interaction cannot be conceived as merely mechanical, because it requires the ability of human beings to select the most suitable way to produce an agreement, the ability to identify with a certain context, the vocation to mediate between universal and particular: the interest to realizing relations.

6. *Communication and Dialogue.* Certainly all of this opens an array of possibilities: the possibility of considering an interlocutor as the interlocutor of a dialogue, or simply as a target, even within the sphere of relationships among followers of different religions. This again means that communicating is always a risk. Precisely, its success is always at risk *either* because the speaker may not be clear or enticing, *or* the listeners may not understand or not want to understand. Dialogue is not possible if two or more interlocutors are not present to carry it out. But if this does occur, communication reveals itself as a *creative act* in the precise sense that it aims at the creation of a common space between two or more interlocutors.

I have spoken of *dialogue* several times. What does 'dialogue', in the true sense, mean? How can it be achieved? The answer to this question means setting the conditions for which even inter-religious dialogue is possible and conflicts can be managed.

In order for it to effectively take place, dialogue suggests the recognition, by each the interlocutors, of the other's 'good will'. This means:

[1] Each participant in the dialogue recognises that his/her position is not absolute, final and unmodifiable. On the other hand, a dialogue in which the speaker – who in addressing others, recognises their right, and the 'space' due to them – acted only for narcissistic reasons, using the interlocutor as a 'mirror' to reflect him/herself, would not be a dialogue in the true sense. In dialogue the motives of the interlocutor are not at all simply functional to confirming one's position, but may induce a change in ideas. In effect what is basic to the successful outcome of dialogue is

[2] the willingness to stake one's all, the ability of exposing oneself from the beginning and without calculation to the words of another, without the guarantee that one's positions will be confirmed, even granting the interlocutor. If this fails, there will not be an authentic dialogue but only the pretence of it, more or less concealed by politeness.

The successful outcome previously mentioned, must apply, if speaking about dialogue, to inter-religious dialogue. This, rather, is what is difficult about inter-religious dialogue.

7. *Ethics in communication.* I am approaching the conclusion of my talk. The final questions are: *why*, then, must we engage in dialogue? Why must we create common space for communication and not simply use language to impose our ideas on and convince our interlocutor of their goodness? In a word: why must we prefer dialogue instead of conflict? We outline the decisive question of moral *involvement*.

A response to such questions could come from an in-depth look at the basis of language and communication, intended as structural conditions of the human being. A German philosopher, Karl-Otto Apel, has elaborated a theory in which a specific moral uniformity is found within the use of the language itself. From the moment in

which, according to Apel, all of us, as speakers, belong to the "community of communication", *we find ourselves putting into practice, through the use of language itself, specific moral principles.* These are: the principle of *justice* (respecting the right of every interlocutor to speak); the principle of *solidarity* (the acknowledgement that others have the same communicative capacity that I acknowledge for myself and the intention to support their use of it); and the principle of *co-responsibility* (the interlocutors assume common responsibility and make sure that the communicative space remains open). By starting from the structure of language itself, it is possible to highlight the conditions of valid universal ethics: Ethics *in* communication.

It is specifically on this level – starting from the fact that within my own speech, there are, so to speak, specific indications of conduct – that the problem of the earlier mentioned term *involvement,* can be solved. Considering the prospect of ethics *in* communication, we can sustain that the conditions of a certain moral conduct, capable of involving all speaking individuals are already inherent in the same communicative processes. We have already seen this: It is connected with the idea of communication as the creation of common space (setting it up and keeping it up), which the interlocutors are responsible for.

Certainly, it is about conditions that must be actually achieved: this is the product of our free will. But our fundamental ethical capacity that is inherent to our language could guide this choice. So, then, in the structure of language itself the possibility of a real ethical communication conduct and a real experience of sharing is inherent. Therefore, the condition of sharing is that each person, separately, is able to say his own, and is acknowledged, right from the beginning, as having the capacity to do it: just as the one who can be helped and urged to do it.

8. *Conclusion : Ethics, Communication, Religious Dialogue.* This universal outlook, which can *motivate* our communicative actions in a precisely ethical sense, must now be applied in actual fact to inter-religious dialogue. With this, my presentation will be concluded. In fact, the idea of communication that I have tried to develop, with its ethical implications, could be a valid model for a successful dialogue among religions as well. There could be two aspects to take into consideration that we have already seen to be critical for adequately carrying out this dialogue in order to avoid conflicts: [1] The aspect regarding the correct way of understanding dialogue among religions; [2] The aspect which relates to a correct handling of the relationship between the particular and the universal.

[1] If we want to make sure that dialogue among religions is possible, it is necessary to start from two ideas: the idea of the particularity of every religion, which must be respected; and the idea of the common aim of every religion: both the relationship between human being and divine sphere; and, starting from this point of view, the relationship among human beings. In this setting, the structure of communicating, seen as a creation of common space among the interlocutors, may possibly enable, not only the respectful consideration of various needs originating

from numerous local contexts – including those that offer resistance and can even react violently to the effects of globalisation processes –, but also, and above all, the adequate reformulation of the relationship between the universal and the particular.

[2] I repeat: we have to reject the fundamentalistic idea of religion. According to this idea, only *a particular idea* of the universal – of the particular pattern of the relationship between human beings and divine sphere – must be imposed all over the world. Fundamentalists forget the particularity of their approach. They connect directly, they muddle up particularity and universality. We have seen that this, all in all, is the logic behind fundamentalism.

Instead, it is the reference itself to the idea of language and of communication that we have previously developed, that shows that the universal – which is expressed and carried out by the use of the word as a medium of an ever-growing sharing among human beings – is that which, on the one hand, proves to be applied, contextualised, and embodied from time to time in various spheres and, on the other hand, becomes the product of an authentic meeting between human beings, capable of creating new horizons. We can think about not only a static universality – expression of pride and arrogance which, in its conquests, Europe often showed – but also, about one that offers a process, never to be taken for granted, of continuous creation, among all interlocutors, of a possible dimension of universality, in which the sharing of that common space among the diverse spheres increases.

All of this, once again, is made possible and is guided by *the spirit of language whose ethical features are of primary importance, and whose test-bed is the dialogue among religions.* But not, as mentioned earlier, by assuming an external outlook toward the religions themselves and from here, by trying to make them engage in dialogue. Instead, it is necessary to make the common elements pertinent to collaboration, emerge from within religions, from life and from the individual's religious experience.

Finally: We have to move in the direction of acknowledging the fact that there are some ethical aspects that are shared by various religious groups. In order to carry out this task, we must be aware that through the way itself, in which the possible comparison between religions, and through the manner of communication, can we open up a common space: a space that works because specific ethical principles are carried out. Only in this way, is it possible to open paths to the achievement of universal sharing among religions.