

# Perceiving and Respecting Differences

A societal responsibility

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May I shortly introduce myself: I am engaged in interreligious dialogue, nationally and internationally, for now 30 years, especially with Islam, being familiar with misunderstandings and prejudiced stereotypes on every side. Since many years I teach Muslim students and, on behalf of the Austrian Foreign Ministry, also Turkish imams. Moreover I cooperate with Muslim scholars within a research project. Therefore I will take some examples from this context, not least because in the meantime Islam has become a public top issue. Lastly I speak from the perspective of me being a protestant Christian and theologian having an option: I don't see any alternative to an attitude proceeding from confidence that it is possible getting to know each other even better, respecting each other in the differences, helping each other and living together as neighborly people.

## **1. The unity of religion and region: an obsolete model**

Religion displays a twofold function: on the one hand it is a personal belief providing spiritual meaning, on the other hand it is lived in community and serves for bringing about identity to groups. But, personal belief can fade into the background by the importance of belonging to a group. People then are "believers" less because of a personal belief, but more because of belonging to a group.

Now, group affiliation as a function of religion can be utilized politically for uniting a region, a country by means of one sole religion, especially when the presence of many different religions is perceived threatening for coherence – also, but not only today. An ancient example is Emperor Constantine who, given a plurality of peoples and religions within the Roman Empire, installed Christianity as a unitary state ideology. This intensified under the reign of Emperor Theodosius I. who in 391 made Christianity the official state religion. Subsequently all Non-Christians were accused of high treason and accordingly penalized.

This model of religion and region forming a unified whole can also apply to different orientations *within* one religion. In the long term no religion remains a uniform entity, but displays a spectrum of varieties bringing the model of religion and region united into troubles. Therefore the Roman Emperors, for holding together their empire, tried to establish a common single Christian doctrine by means of several councils at the cost of excluding and perse-

cutting Christians not submitting. Many of them fled to other countries e.g. to Arabia or Persia. This happened again in medieval times; the inquisition branded heretics who deviated from the doctrine of the Roman-Catholic Church and let them become executed in order to keep the unity of the so-called Christian West – the *res publica Christiana*.

## **2. Conditions for living together: tolerance and religious freedom**

However, there were periods when different religions and various religious orientations within one religion could live together in one country, but only under the precondition of tolerant rulers. This e.g. was the case in the Arabic Muslim Empire of the Abbasids starting in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. There the East Syrian and West Syrian Christians, polemicizing against each other because of their controversial creed, lived together after having escaped from the Byzantines who persecuted them because of heresy; they also lived together with Muslims – apart from ad hoc attacks. Since the Abbasid Caliphs from time to time also employed the religion of Islam as a uniting tie in case of tribe rivalries, civil wars or social tensions within their Empire.

Likewise Spain, the Muslim Al-Andalus, can be cited an example where different Christian confessions, Jews and Muslims co-existed from the 7<sup>th</sup> century on, before the Christian Reconquista started in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Jews, Christians and Muslims also lived together on the Balkans under the rule of the Muslim Ottomans, whereas in Austria the Roman-Catholic House of Habsburg persecuted all Non-Catholics during the Counter-Reformation in order to maintain the unity of religion and region.

When it turned out, in the course of Reformation, that it was impossible to checkmate the religious deviants, the Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555 agreed on letting the Christian confessions live side by side. But at the same time a principle was decisive called *cuius regio, eius religio* which means: A person must adopt the respective rulers' confession, otherwise at least leave the country. This can be called a compromise: The various confessions were tolerated, but by establishing different confessional regencies the unity of religion and region was taken account of. This could not prevent the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648).

Such forms of tolerance, however, are not equivalent to freedom of religion, but based on restrictions such as less civic rights and the legal prohibition to appear on the public scene. In Austria the Patent of Tolerance enacted by Emperor Joseph II in 1781 opposed the “harmfulness of coercion of conscience” and granted the free practice of religion to Protestants, Orthodox Christians and Jews, but only privately; they should not be recognizable in public.

Only gradually freedom of religion as a human basic right was asserted, in Austria with the state law dating from 1867 which is still valid.

Human beings are different and hold different convictions. Only external coercion can alter this condition as the despotisms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century tried, Communism and National Socialism, while substituting the identity-establishing role of religion. Also religions exist in the Plural, and from this history a lesson can be drawn: Under the conditions of plurality only – at least – tolerance and freedom of religion are able to ensure peace.

### **3. Destructive reactions on plurality: backward-looking utopian dreams**

Religion has lost its identity-establishing power; this is the sober diagnosis. A Europe searching for identity again reverts to nationalisms as in Serbia, Hungary or Belgium as well as in many other European countries; right-wing populist parties are a symptom for that. There still are regions dominated by a religion or confession as for instance Austria by Roman Catholicism, but today all societies the longer the more exhibit a mix.

This diversity is opposed by political and religious groups wanting to rebuild the identity of religion and region. They nourish backward-looking utopian dreams and demand going back to the whole beginnings of a religion and a time when religion and region were not separated: What there once was should again be resumed – by force or not, over here on the political floor by powerful eloquence. At the same time these beginnings are glorified and religious institutions blamed for being guilty of absenting themselves from the first lines thus betraying the ideals.

To these groups e.g. the Society of St. Pius belongs attached to the utopia of a Roman-Catholic occident. There exist also fundamentalist groups behaving militantly against the so-called modernism, against processes of secularization and against pluralism they identify with relativism. Along with fundamentalist also several charismatic groups form an ideal world of their own. To the conditions for belonging are counted: individual conversion, strict moral rules and directly accessing the scriptures without relating to theological traditions of interpretation. Lax members are put under pressure. At the same time this ideal world is considered to be a model for the whole world und therefore propagated with missionary vigor.

Such backward-looking utopian dreams become frequently connected with the political aim to reinstall the unity of religion and region, may it be by open rhetoric and action or subversive. However, this ends up in a paradox: Attempting such a unity only leads to an ongoing societal fragmentation promoting plurality. For behind that lies the abnegation of

reality, namely that religion is no longer able to accomplish identity. And today's worldwide communication and migration movements are definitely thwarting uniform religious landscapes.

#### **4. Farewell to mission aiming at conversion**

The term "mission" ordinarily visualizes a certain practice, namely taking the initiative for systematically disseminating a belief via religious institutions or religious groups organizing and financing in order to convert all human-beings to adopting this belief. This concept – and here I refer to Christianity – goes back to colonial times when the Christian missionaries of different confessions joined the European colonial rulers who took over extra-European regions; the missionaries participated in the political power of these rulers for spreading their respective confession. One idea was to convert as much people as possible in order to save them from eternal damnation. This kind of mission is still practiced by several charismatic groups in Africa and Southeast Asia.

This understanding of mission is turned against other religions which are considered to be the wrong way against the own way regarded the right one. Therefore all adherents of other religions are to be dissuaded from their belief. Such a strategic mission deliberately aiming at conversion is not only dubious theologically, but also apt jeopardizing societal cohesion in societies marked by a pluralism of religions. For the sake of cohesion, on the contrary, it would be necessary to approve the pluralism of religions dealing with that in a constructive way. This does not oppose Christians acting worthy of their belief and living according to Jesus' commandment of bringing about peace. Belief has to do with certitude and the ability for providing information, also in the context of an interreligious dialogue. But this testifying has nothing to do with a mission aiming at conversion, possibly even proving a success by counting numbers.

#### **5. The religions' societal responsibility**

Since about the mid of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new paradigm can be recognized having developed within the Christian confessions. Since then religion does no longer stand at the center, but a new social reality. The increasing presence of people professing other religions – in vicinity, in schools and at universities, in business or the shop round the corner ask for dealing with advancing pluralism in a human and adequate way. All together live in *one* world sharing the care of their families; they share worrying about their daily bread and wanting appreciation

and a succeeding life. In order that the societal cohesion may not break, and responsibility for the world and its inhabitants could be taken, dealing with each other respectfully without defaming is necessary.

This new paradigm, referring especially to the growing presence of Muslims can already be found in the resolution *Nostra aetate* adopted by the Second Vatican Council; it says: “Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom” (Art. 3).

Also the „Charta Oecumenica“ in 2001 wants to foster encounters between Christians and Muslims as well as the Christian-Muslim dialogue and commits itself “to conduct ourselves towards Muslims with respect; to work together with Muslims on matters of common concern” (Art. 11).

Such an attitude also makes the basis of a paper, published by the “General Synod of the Lutheran and Reformed Church in Austria” on October 26<sup>th</sup> 2011, entitled “Protestant Christians and Muslims in Austria”. This paper, the book version was published in 2012, intends to be a guideline for pastors and teachers in order to promote relations and dialogue with Muslims. Inter alia it says: “So true it is there being no peace possible among people without peace between religions, so little does this imply a unity of religions” (c. IV, 3); still less a unity of religion and region.

## **6. Communicating with each other: how to comprehend dialogue**

In these ecclesial statements religion is not the primary point of reference. But obviously religions not only are a mere abstract construct in brains, but make an impact on the practical conduct of life influencing reasoning and emotions, attitudes and actions. People consorting with each other in a human way therefore need to become acquainted with each other, and this includes the respective religious profile. Insofar also religious issues and topics are of importance. In a society hosting not only various religions but secular worldviews, too, religious illiteracy arises. Therefore knowledge in the matter of religion belongs to educational formation.

In a pluralistic society it is essential that people of different religions get to know each other even better. This requires revising misunderstandings and prejudices, especially in respect of the religion of Islam, a long history of mutual polemics and depreciation had

fixated. So e.g. Islam is reproached a martial religion. However, this religion originated in an environment where combats between tribes and attacks on caravans frequently were on the agenda. And such occurrences in those days, also Muslims were involved in, are reflected in the Qur'an. In reverse the Christians are blamed for adoring three Gods. However, the phrase of the triune God points to the threefold creative actions of the one unique God. God is confessed being the creator of the world and all human-beings, the revelator in Jesus Christ and the spirit strengthening faith and connecting people in community.

The way to perceiving and acknowledging the self-understanding of the others is: dialogue. This requires the partners in dialogue representing their own religion with conviction, because human-beings communicate and not religions. For that an attitude is needed not fending off, but being emotionally open and willing to understand and listening to reason, even if this contradicts a previous pre-understanding. Approaching something new does not mean to abandon one's own certainty of faith which would contradict the meaning of certainty; but certainty does not subsist on dissociation or denigration of others. Thus the religious traditions are not viewed from a third outer "neutral" position. Rather the point is to substantiate an interreligious dialogue, a pluralistic society demands, by the respective own belief and own tradition as a self-commitment.

Some examples from a Christian perspective: This means that God has created all human-beings, not only Jews or Christians or Muslims, not only Catholics or Lutherans, not only Sunnis or Shias. This implies that God' saving will also applies to all human-beings not being able to live without becoming guilty (*non posse non peccare*). And this means further that God is merciful towards all, as a just God willing to bring back all to the right path (repentance) and examining them in the Last Judgment, an idea not very popular today. But this is up to God and not the responsibility of creatures.

In the whole bible the importance of peace is addressed. Therefore in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls blessed all who bring about peace (Mt 5, 9), and this points to an initiative action. God is a God of peace as the Apostle Paul stresses several times. Christians are not only obliged to keep peace among themselves but with all human-beings: "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peacefully with all" (Rom 12, 17-18).

This kind of dialogue does not aim at a theological consensus, but at *understanding* the respective other religion from the perspective of one's own religion. In this sense the Protestant guideline I mentioned above stresses: "Understanding encourages respect, human

sympathy and mutual protection of freedom without unrealistically aiming too high.” In dialogue the peculiarity of the others is to be perceived the way the others argue. Then it may happen to see that questions the others ask sometimes turn out to also be controversially discussed within one’s own tradition. A high-quality *inter*-religious dialogue usually ends up in an *inner*-religious dialogue. Thus what seems self-evident within one’s own tradition becomes challenged for reviewing and specifying.

Thereby also the significant differences will emerge, in spite of what is in common, calling for mutual respect. And it is respect that opens up a prospect of living together while pursuing common goals like charity, peace, social justice, integrity of creation, even if this is grounded differently by the different religions according to their respective self-understanding.

## **7. Challenges and obligations today**

Religions can be vital platforms for social peace when speaking with one another instead of ignoring, missionizing or vilifying, when respecting each other in the differences and acting together in societal responsibility. What matters today is not repelling diversity, but accept the crucial challenge, namely living with diversity.

Admittedly, this is not an easy task and the way there only still started. But the much-debated European identity can only consist in concepts developing models of dealing with varieties and differences respectfully while seeing off the idea of uniting religion with region. Surely, it is not possible to bring about a sudden change for the whole world from a standing position. But it is possible to here and there establish oases of respectfully dealing with each other and produce a radiating microclimate.

Today Christians are challenged to advocate:

- the conviction that all human-beings are created by God;
- providing a home for different autonomous religions in one society;
- not mutually reckoning up the history of conflicts and not dissuading each other from searching for peace;
- a dialogue where not religions communicate but human-beings enrooted in their respective belief;
- correcting and cutting back misunderstandings and prejudices;

- more educational formation in matters of religion – at all levels: schools, universities, media;
- a society where human-beings of different ethnical background and different religions live together without conflicts.

Thus Christians are indebted to what Jesus Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount: „Blessed are the peacemakers“.