

## New spaces for East-West dialogue\*

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With the era of Extremes and the Twin Towers behind us, we are now facing a new and contiguous pluralism. The world map of religions is undergoing tremendous transgenic change. The age of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion), is in demise. Los Angeles is now the largest Buddhist city in the world. The Catholic

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\*Translation Juliet Attwater.

Church is growing fast in Asia. England has nearly the same number of Muslims as it does Anglicans. Hinduism and Christianity have seen a series of symbolic exchanges with Henri Le Saux and Thomas Merton.

The theology of religions today is part of a wider and more varied plan that shows there is no other path than through dialogue, in the synergy that this creates, and in the relationship that ultimately depends on the condition of progress and power. It is in this area of risk and unease that we are moving, acting, and being.

192 This is the somewhat dreamed-of interstitial face between East and West. All eyes are fixed on a culture of peace, now projected through the pains of labour, which allow no rest, in these days of massacre and ethnic cleansing in the Middle East.

The dialogue answers through an incomplete cartography that parties adhere to—fiercely protecting their own identity—and weaving a living fabric in which the intelligence of the process is not immobilised by potential mere function. There are no more opposite sides. We are all on the same side, involved in webs of dialogue that are often arduous, but also deeply thoughtful and delicate, set along a horizon where religions show a sensitivity to otherness under the umbrella of ecumenical teaching. All this, together with the relativism of superficiality and a syncretism that is contested by those who seek a convincingly complete synthesis, a *lingua universalis*, without scent or beauty, tends more to serve the vertiginous flow of info-

capital than to actually create any ideal conditions for the praxis of encounter.

We need the flame of an authentic dialogue that does not restrict biodiversity, that does not dampen cultural and religious affiliations, that does not value the beauty of differing parties over a monotonous sterile environment that risks extinguishing the brightest points that define and constitute us. It would be aligned with imposing the desert of market theology on the cornucopia of ancient poetics.

Dialogue grows in the pluralist heavens of thought, not through dialectics which are ready to criticise their interlocutors, and which lead to the amnesic synthesis of them both, beings legitimized by a growing entropy. Because everything exists in relation to the other, face to face. As Martin Buber said, the isolated “I” does not exist, and neither does it support the Thou alone. There cannot be an “I” in “it”, an “I” and “Thou” introduces the genesis of Dialogue, of the essence of interlocution.

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I think of the bright flashes in the sky in the poem by Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (1689-1752) and I sense a new relationship between heaven and earth:

The lightning flashes through the air  
And arrives in Istanbul,  
It races toward the western horizon,  
Touching China lightly then  
Glittering in Samarkand  
And soaked with happy memories  
It moves on to Rome and Kabul  
Surrounding Kandahar  
And unleashing a storm over Delhi  
(..)

And they make a luminous streak through the sky, bringing together the most diverse of cities, a pure dynamic of water and glittering memories. The flash of the word, that summons everyone from every latitude to the I and Thou. This is the fascination of the ethics of dialogue, of its sensitive poetics, which restores the balance of extremism and combats the malaise of exclusion once difference is no longer an epistemological demon that needs to be remorselessly eliminated.

194 The presupposition of the dialogue, hovering between lightning and storm, memory and light, abnegates the aseptic non-participatory narrative floating a few metres over the soil of History. Dialogue cannot thrive in a cold, clean, uninhabited glasshouse. Nor is it indifferent to its guests' addresses, or to the waning of an agenda of intentions. If it were merely this, it would be nothing more than a simulacrum that lacked the beauty of everything that we are not. Because the Other is a source of wonderment and delight.

Hans Küng responded to these challenges in his pioneering project entitled *Declaration towards a global ethic*, which is based on an inter-religious dialogue with which I partially agree, particularly when he states that dialogue cannot be:

an indifference that is indifferent to everything, an indifference to any pretension of orthodoxy that positions itself as being people's salvation or destruction, and that seeks to impose its veracity through means of power and coercion.

And he then goes on:

A relativism for which there is no such thing as an absolute, but instead, a greater awareness of relativity in relation to all of mankind's absolutisms, which block any productive coexistence between different religions. We need to be more aware of relativity, which allows us to understand all religions through their relationships.

In my desire to follow this path of peace, in January 2014 I went to Delhi to visit the mausoleum of the mystic Nizamuddin Aulia (नज़ामुद्दीन दरगाह), the Sufi saint from the century of Dante and Rûmî, who is respected by both Hindus and Muslims, and who transmits a perennial sense of otherness in the spirit of heartfelt compassion.

I arrive at dusk on a Thursday at the portentous pilgrim's corner. For Nizamuddin, music and poetry reflect emotion in the face of the cosmos, the radiant beauty of the I and Thou. A man then starts to recite an ancient Urdu poem by Sain Bulleh Shah which is dear to me:

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Nor am I a believer of the mosque,  
Nor am I in rituals of the infidel  
Nor am I the pure inside the impure.

Nor am I inherent in the Vedas,  
Nor am I present in intoxicants.  
Nor am I lost nor the corrupt.

Nor am I union, nor grief,  
Nor am I intrinsic in the pure/impure  
Nor am I of water, nor of land.

Nor am I fire nor air.  
Bulla! I know not who I am

Nor am I Arabic, nor from Lahore,  
Nor am I the Indian city of Nagour.  
Nor Hindu or a Turk from Peshawar.

Nor did I create differences of faith,  
Nor did I create Adam and Eve  
Nor did I name my self.

Beginning or end, I just know the self,  
Do not acknowledge duality.  
There's none wiser than I.

Who is this Bulla shah  
Bulla! I know not who I am.

A knowledge that comes from not knowing, that lives in another space that transcends—without regulating religious affiliations and territories. It belongs only to the Thou, the Beloved, in its absolute and irresistible condition. Like Shah Abdul and Nizamuddin, Bulleh Shah is part of an ancient lineage of mysticism, which goes well beyond the question of canon and is open to all the variations of the I and Thou. A similar approach can be found in the Qur'an 5.48, which clearly praises difference:

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وَأَرْسَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ  
الْكِتَابِ وَمُهَيِّبًا عَلَيْهِمْ فَأَنْصَرِفْهُمْ يَوْمَ مَا أُرْسِلَ اللَّهُ وَلَا  
تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْحَقِّ لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً  
وَمِنْهَا جَاءَ وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَكِنْ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي  
مَا آتَيْنَاكُمْ فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا  
فِي يَوْمٍ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

Though I highlight only the second part:

We have sent messengers before you—some of them we mentioned to you, and some we did not mention to you. No messenger can produce any miracle without God's authorization. Once God's judgment is issued, the truth dominates, and the falsifiers are exposed and humiliated. (40,78.)

This is one of the sources of the Qur'an's Otherness, among other passages, which cultivates the Sufi mystic, and makes him more radical, just as the great poets of Islam who focused on an inexhaustible grammar did, and for which Jalaluddin Rûmî is a central figure. At the same time, it seems clear that dialogue and religious affiliations do not have to be as contradictory as the extreme-right wing in Europe and in America would have one believe. For them the only meeting between East and the West can take place after the depth of Levantine metaphysics has been undermined, and considered an outdated clash of civilizations, after the mother of all wars, and a laboratory of extremism.

As I leave Nizamuddin's tomb I can still make out a few 197  
obdurate stars still shining through the polluted skies of Delhi. I walk slowly and purposefully, with a theme and variation, and an un-ending conversation with Djalaluddin Rûmî:

What can I do, Muslims? I do not know myself.  
I am neither Christian nor Jew, nor Muslim,  
I am not from east or west, not from land or sea,  
not from the shafts of nature nor from the sky,  
not of the earth, not of water, not of air, not of fire.  
I am not from the highest heaven, not from this world,  
not from existence, not from being.  
I am not from India, from China, no from Bulgaria, not from  
Saqsan,  
I am not from the world, not from beyond,  
not from heaven and not from hell.  
I am not from Adam, not from Eve, nor from paradise and hell.  
My place is placeless, my trace is traceless,  
no body, no soul, I am from the soul of souls.  
I broke the duality, lived the two worlds as one.  
One I seek, one I know, one I see, one I call.

I have no concern but carouse and rapture.  
If one day in my life I spend a moment without you,  
from that hour and that time I would repent my life.  
If one day I am given a moment in solitude with you,  
I will trample the two worlds underfoot and dance forever.  
O Sun of Tabriz, I am so tipsy here in this world,  
I have no tale to tell but tipsiness and rapture.

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