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DIVERSE CULTURAL AND  
RELIGIOUS WAYS OF  
THINKING: A DIALOGUE

Edited by

Thierry-Marie Courau and  
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# Editorial

Our planet is made up of very diverse cultural and religious universes. What happens when they face one another? How do they meet and engage in dialogue when their rational approach and apprehension of the world are unique? What happens when a Chinese person receives a European thought, a European discourse, of which the structures of language and reasoning have been constructed and elaborated over centuries? And conversely? More generally, how do we think and communicate in a particular culture, in a specific religious tradition, in a determined world? How do we make ourselves understood by others? Can we understand them?

These questions, ever-present in a contemporary globalized world, under pressure from the multiplication and speeding up of encounters that can turn into real clashes of culture, are of fundamental importance for theological research as they are for many other fields, starting with political theory. While communications apparently bring people closer together, conflicts based on different world-views are nevertheless breaking out all the time. The reaction takes the form of retreats, rejection, exclusion, the building of barriers, fences, walls.

This issue of *Concilium* tackles the task of exploring the issue of the uniqueness of cultural and religious forms of reasoning and of the possibilities of dialogue between them, and of the importance of the issue for theology today. We choose to use 'reasoning' to denote a vision, an approach, a unique rational grasp of the world. A way of reasoning is understood here to mean a complex of interwoven grammars, mental structures developed to apprehend and report what one experiences and learns. The subject is not new. Very different disciplines have dealt with it, from philosophy to sociology, including anthropology, linguistics and history, in an effort to establish what is the result of the encounter of different ways of thinking and, sometimes, what methods allow for

constructive dialogue. Nevertheless there are still few collective attempts to respond to the twofold challenge of combining approaches and disciplines, on the one hand, and dealing with a variety of cultural and religious areas, on the other. Moreover, the question is rarely considered from the point of view of the encounter of religions or, if it is, religion is simply included as a form of culture. As for theology, it has dealt very little with the question directly, even though in the nature of things the Church has been confronted by it for a long time. Mission, the history of texts and doctrines, hermeneutics, inculturation, to name only a few, are all fields deeply affected by this dynamic.

### **Why not a change of model?**

The June 2016 Paris Congress, sponsored by *Concilium*, the Institute of the Sciences and Theology of Religion (ISTR) of the Theologicum – the faculty of theology and religious studies of the Institut Catholique de Paris – and the Dominican Order as part of the celebrations of its 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary, decided to explore the hypothesis that recognition of the cultural and religious uniqueness of a world with its aspects that are irreducible to the terms of other worlds is not a problem or an obstacle to genuine dialogue. Quite the opposite; the assumption is that becoming aware of the uniqueness of another person is one of the key advantages that enables us to progress towards a more accurate knowledge of ourselves and to construct a common model of society.

This seems to be a real paradigm change because the most widespread approach, the majority opinion, is the belief that a successful dialogue must start with what is most alike in the parties, look for a common basis, an actual unity, rather than any division or diversity. To test the relevance of this paradigm change the organizers wanted the approach to be both interdisciplinary – combining human sciences, religious studies, theology and art – and multicultural, with the participations of worlds and religions that had their own cultures. The results collected in this issue are of course very partial,<sup>1</sup> but may help to take this question seriously. The presentation is structured in four stages: exploring cultural and religious forms of reasoning, contact with the realities on the ground, truth and universals, and some theological perspectives. The first stage is an attempt to clarify concepts. The second exposes the concepts to the challenge of real life. The third considers the conceptual opportunities offered by such

a paradigm. The fourth outlines ways forward to make theology fruitful in the future.

### **Exploring cultural and religious reasoning**

The concept of reasoning cannot be grasped simply or immediately. It is difficult to translate from one language to another. It leads us into systems of meaning proper to each language and each way of apprehending the world that are part of geographical spaces, histories and psychologies that are always complex. The aim of this first stage is to do justice to the complexity of the reality that the term denotes in different contexts, in particular religious contexts, with the aid of Western philosophy and the resources of Chinese culture.

The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, from the University of Lyon (France), looks for the epistemological and hermeneutical paradigms of encounters between religious cultures. He suggests imagining religion as a Leibnizian monad, both closed in on itself, without door or windows, and like a mirror of the human spirit. Rejecting the idea of an unlimited differentialism and that of a unity and universality that erases differences, he tries to isolate the elements that can lead to processes of understanding and mutual agreement between religions. In particular he suggests calling in a mediator who can construct the narrative of a new intelligibility between the partners seeking dialogue.

Huang Po Ho, a Presbyterian theologian and vice-president of Chang Jung Christian University in Taiwan, observes how the way of thinking of the Chinese ethnic majority, the Han, developed from the originally pictographic forms of their writing. Concepts and abstractions are expressed through concrete examples and metaphors. These characteristics have developed a particular way of approaching the world intuitively, giving priority to the idea of the circle and insisting on particularity at the expense of universality. How do these models of thought, shaped partly by the religious experiences characteristic of this universe, produce Asian theologies?

### **In contact with the realities on the ground**

*When ways of reasoning start looking for mutual understanding, what takes place is a process of listening, of dialogue. This effort reveals the*

*difficulty of understanding another person as they understand themselves. To do no more than explore the person through their concepts alone seems to lead to a dead end. What we then need to do is to find our way into totally different thought categories and give them expression in our own language. This brings in translation as a central category. But this encounter of different forms of reasoning is not just the field of specialists and scholars. It runs through the history of human societies, through the innumerable contacts produced by trade, migration, political alliances and military conquests, scientific correspondence, religious developments, and so on. What do these ways of reasoning produce in this contact? Conflicts, interbreeding, creativity, etc.? New forms of reasoning? Three very different encounters are discussed here, from Asia, the French Caribbean and Latin America. They show us something of the processes at work.*

The French specialist in the modern and colonial history of South East Asia Romain Bertrand, shows how in the Malacca straits in the 16<sup>th</sup> century contacts – commercial, diplomatic and military – multiplied between the Europeans (Portuguese, Dutch, British) and the political societies of the Malay world (Aceh, Banten, Pattani). These contacts are frequently presented as a head-on collision between two religious worlds that were naturally hostile to each other. But studying these events, using documents from both worlds, shows that it was primarily and most importantly commercial and political rivalries that motivated the potentates of South East Asia in their interactions with the Europeans. This reinterpretation, to produce ‘even-handed history’,<sup>2</sup> is indispensable in understanding how these worlds really met and, while each had its own perspective, established forms of coexistence.

Poetry is itself an ambitious model of cultural dialogue in the work of two 20<sup>th</sup>-century poets from the island of Martinique, Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant. Using text from these two authors, Anne Douaire-Banny, a professor of Francophone literature, shows how negritude is a proclamation of humanity that does not shut itself up in a skin colour. In their work Relation exceeds cultural interbreeding and reveals a rhizomic world in which firm rootedness in one’s place is an opening to otherness. Its opacity, claimed and accepted, is a barrier to the constant threat of global uniformity.

The Dominican theologian Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez, professor at the Ibero-American University in Mexico, puts forward an analysis of social, epistemic and spiritual resistance movements as experienced by the victims of the system's violence. After the breakdown of instrumental reason, he argues that we have to start thinking in terms of a plural form of reasoning, a reasoning that has emerged from the resistance struggles and is capable of doing justice to the experiences, stories and symbols characteristic of people and communities who live in a state of 'resilience'. He calls this reasoning 'messianic' to emphasize the theological sense of the kenosis of the Word of God, who came into the world to save it. By examining practices and stories of gift-giving from the lives of victims who have gone beyond the stage of hate, he shows that eschatological anticipation becomes a genuine faith-understanding that can save the world.

### **On truth and universality**

The real-life examples show clearly that cultures and religions are living systems that constantly generate their reasoning in contact with 'foreignness', a way of reasoning that is always unique. So, in the face of the hypothesis that seems established that forms of reasoning are not reducible to one another, two concepts crucial for the West, truth and universality, come in for questioning. Does the validation of the hypothesis necessarily lead to a theological, philosophical and anthropological relativism? Is access to truth still possible? Should we abandon the postulate of the universality of human reason? For dialogue to take place, do the forms of reasoning involved have to meet in a universal?

To answer this question, Olivier Abel, professor of ethical philosophy at the Protestant Institute of Theology (Paris-Montpellier) and creator of the Ricoeur Fund, starts from the metaphorical character of 'living' truth and universality. He takes up some themes from an old text of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur that sees the cumulative advances of world civilization being eaten away by the scepticism produced by a touristic relationship with cultures in which 'there are only others'. In the face of the danger highlighted by Ricoeur, the temptation to melt down all cultures in a destructive syncretism, Abel sets out the conditions for a creative encounter

coming from the heart of cultures and proposes ‘a consonance without agreement’.

For his part, the philosopher and theologian François Bousquet, consultant to the Pontifical Council for Culture, takes up the challenge of imagining a universality that respects the otherness of ‘the other’ in whatever may be its irreducible dimension, while engaging in a truthful dialogue. This leads him to look for a greater truth, starting from the three orders of truth – noetic, ethical and religious. Then he emphasizes the universality that is not found in the general, but in the truth of the unique in relation. He goes on to consider three experiences of a plural that is not without unity, which allows us to hope for convergences that respect fruitful differences: the transcendentals, translation confronted by an excess of meaning, and the individual person in humanity where each is unique and all are in solidarity.

### **Some theological perspectives**

In the light of this journey, the many cultural and religious mixings have to be reconsidered. A retreat into one’s identity or the absorption of differences are not the only outcomes of globalization. Recognizing forms of reasoning in their irreducible uniqueness opens the path to the building of a pedagogy for living-together. Theology takes up this challenge and re-examines its use of reason when it talks about its scriptures, its doctrinal traditions and its practices, for the benefit of the common good and of believers.

Starting from the Asian, and particularly the Indian, experience, Felix Wilfred brings a sharp eye to our personal way of apprehending the world and the other. While it is our first means of entering a relation, it must be understood as situated in a culture and having numerous limitations. Theology loses its footing in reality and its universal character when it proclaims that it cannot express itself except in a certain type of reasoning, a particular language. The relationship between faith and reason cannot be treated univocally. Every language generates a set of thought models that are not merely conceptual but also practical. Asian traditions see themselves as paths towards and quests for the experience of ultimate truth, and do not think of the activity of reason in any other way. In Asia Christian theology has to see itself in relation to this sort of dynamic reason. This conclusion can be applied in other sociocultural contexts. This leads the author to

some specific suggestions for the future of Catholic theologies in Asia and in the world more generally.

The master of the Order of Preachers, Bruno Cadoré, who gave the opening lecture at the Congress, discussed dialogue as an experience of truth. The eighth centenary of his order gave him the opportunity to go back to the fundamental intuitions of its founder, Dominic de Guzmán, who sent his friars out to distant places, using four verbs: leave, meet, study, stay. These verbs tell us something about reason and its relationship to truth. It is in leaving the familiarity of our world, and renouncing any dialogue that produced an easy but illusory consensus on the content, that we have to engage resolutely in thinking with others. And, as the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas suggests, we must adopt ‘beyond dialogue a new maturity and a new seriousness, a new gravity and a new patience and, if we can put it like this, maturity and seriousness for insoluble problems’. To remain in this ‘presence of persons confronted with a problem’ makes it possible to stay on this demanding path of a reason whose structure is eschatological. It is the path on which, for those who seek it together in dialogue, ‘truth’ reveals itself even as it slips from their grasp.

The dean of the Theologicum – the faculty of theology and religious studies of the Institut Catholique de Paris – Dominican friar Thierry-Marie Courau, who launched this project and has led it for over five years, ventures a short provisional conclusion, an invitation to see unity as the aim of co-responding to the call of truth. Unity is not a pre-existing average, but instead an eschatological aim. It is in allowing ourselves to become dialogue-creatures that human beings become truly human and made capable of unity by the third party, the medium that both separates them and unites them, the Logos who came in flesh.

This issue ends with the Theological Forum, which reflects two significant recent events, the canonization of Mother Teresa on 4 September 2016 in Rome, and an international theological congress held in Latin America, in the Colombian capital of Bogotá in September 2016. The first article, from Felix Wilfred in Madras, is a reflection from a theologian who is also an Indian, on how we should understand this astonishing example of 20th-century holiness, and how to avoid her absorption by a Western consumerist world that wants to avoid radical questioning of the systems that corrupt our planet. The second article, from the Colombia Jesuit Hermann Rodríguez Osorio, presents the theme of the Congress, ‘Pope Francis’s Questions to Theologians Today’, and so witnesses to the impact

of the Argentine Bishop of Rome on current movements and questioning within the Church in Latin America.

*Thierry-Marie Courau and Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez*  
*Translated by Francis McDonagh*

*Notes*

1. Over a hundred presentations were delivered at the panels organized during the Congress. They will be made available during 2017 in the Proceedings, to be published by Éditions du Cerf in their Patrimoines collection.
2. Cf. Romain Bertrand, *L'Histoire à Parts Égales: Récits d'une rencontre, Orient-Occident (XVIe–XVIIe siècle)*, Paris, 2011.