

# Religion, Plural Society and Common Good

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*An excerpt from the lecture by Oasis President, Cardinal Angelo Scola, on 15 November at the Heythrop College, University of London, in which he considers four common areas for development awaiting Christians and Muslims: **religious freedom, economic crisis, secularisation and ethical issues**. It is the idea of the new cultural relevance that Christians and Muslims can have of each other.*

## 1. The experience of the *humanum*

At the moment when we decided to embark on the adventure of Oasis nearly ten years ago, we took a gamble on the fact that encounter would be a real possibility, that it was and is possible to communicate, because subjects share many basic questions and one and the same experience on the level of affections, of work, and of rest. As Blessed John Paul II declared, “yet something does exist that can be called the experience of man”. The conjunction with which the sentence opens shows his awareness of his position. In fact, though, if it is true that this shared experience of the *humanum* does exist, it is also true that it never occurs “in the pure state”. It is always expressed through the medium of a culture, and that has to be the case, since, as John Paul II again teaches in his famous speech to UNESCO in 1980: «*Man has no being outside of culture. Culture is a specific mode of man's existence and being*». If, then, there are ultimate questions that transcend cultural expressions and draw on the deep roots of human experience, this means that the various cultures are potentially comprehensible to each other. We can have an encounter with one another. The experiences of one person or community are, so to speak, *translatable* into that of others.

It is a fact nonetheless that the level of translatability varies a great deal from era to era. There are periods in which communication between civilisations and religions seems almost impossible, there are others however in which the emergence of questions of common interest facilitates exchange. We might think of when the Jesuit Matteo Ricci came into contact with China or of the journey that the very gifted Muslim scientist al-Bîrûnî undertook to India at the start of the year 1000. For both men, landing in the Far East was almost like being dumped down on another planet. Today however, as a consequence of the process of the “*métissage* of civilisations”, we are traversing one of those periods when cultures and religions are constrained, almost in spite of themselves, to converse with each other. Since history is the realm of freedom, this phenomenon does not exclude the possibility of a return to remoteness in the future, nor should it be allowed to conceal the reality of fundamentalistic and violent interpretations which in fact prevent communication. Nonetheless, we consider that an analysis of the facts suggests clearly enough that there are certain universally relevant questions, at least for anyone who is disposed to listen to them.

## 2. Universally relevant questions

We can summarise these questions in their most basic form like this: what type of persons do the women and men of the third millennium want to be? This question looks only apparently abstract, since in actual fact the way it is answered is crucial for many practical issues. For example, the question of the destruction of the environment ; technoscience, the risk of reducing human beings to the object of their own experiments; or the form that the global economy will adopt in response to the financial crisis. In particular, with respect to relations between Christians and Muslims, it seems to me that there are four areas where the

universally relevant question about what it means to be human find a particularly powerful expression today, and where questioning each other can end up being very enriching.

### 2.1 *Truth and Freedom*

The first level and the most radical is that of the truth-freedom nexus. How can we hold together the striving for truth with the acknowledgement of the intangibility of personal freedom? Can we be certain that something is objectively true, in itself and for everyone, while at the same time accepting that others do not share - or share only partially - this conviction of ours? Here, of course, nobody can claim to be taking up the position of teacher, since the equilibrium between the two arguments, which is always tense and precarious, requires to be constantly rebalanced. The West seems to have abandoned the striving for truth *pro bono pacis*, preferring to settle for a coexistence that is nonetheless proving to be more and more precarious because it is founded on purely utilitarian considerations. On the other hand, the difficulties and the negations that religious freedom (which is wider than a mere freedom of worship) continues to encounter in various parts of the Muslim world demonstrate that in those latitudes too the solution remains elusive. Significantly, scholars like Olivier Roy consider that it is precisely the question of religious freedom that will very soon be the catalyst for the tensions in Muslim societies, as they gradually abandon their traditional arrangement. In this connection, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council offers us the potential for a non-relativistic foundation for religious freedom. On the practical level, however, we need to be realistic about recognising that this awareness is painfully slow to develop: either there is a tendency to relativism, even among believers, as happens not infrequently in the West, or else religious freedom is so limited as to be effectually suppressed, as in some states that define themselves as “Islamic”. Here then is an initial area for work, one that can easily be extended to include not just the question of violence, terrorism, and war, but also that of the conception of democracy and freedom of expression.

### 2.2. *“Pondering” the crisis*

A much more urgent requirement would seem to be a serious debate on the economic-financial crisis, as a more macroscopic expression of the general travail that post-modern societies are going through. A stone’s throw away from the City I hardly need to labour this point. As Benedict XVI observed in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, it is not sufficient to make do with a merely cosmetic operation, a modest injection of ethics as a means of humanising a market that is taken to be a natural rather than a cultural fact. It is necessary, as the Pope observes, to broaden the scope of economic reason, opening it up to the logic of the gift, of the gratuitous. On this point the social doctrine of the Church is as remote as possible from being a merely pietistic-moralistic discourse. The centrality of gratuitousness in the structuring of human societies emerges for example from the studies of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, certainly not a thinker who can be classified as pious . In fact, the crisis represents the refutation of the idea that an authentically human coexistence can be founded just on the pure and simple acceptance of the empirically real.

These anthropological reflections are not intended to obscure in any way the extreme political gravity of the moment, dominated by what in another place I have called the “war of the credit *spread*”. It was Von Clausewitz who famously said that war is politics continued by other means. Today, however, given the grave state of crisis of political culture, finance is in danger of becoming war continued under another form. What might be the alternative? In my opinion, a new idea of Europe. It is not of course a question of rhetorically counterposing the Europe of ideals to the Europe of finance, not least because it is clear from the start which would come out on top in any such confrontation. Rather, from within the current dynamics,

it is a question of re-formulating - *with new and creative energy* - the basic idea that brought around the same table countries that had fought one another, tooth and nail, for almost half a century. The hypothesis taken as the starting-point was that needs, which had been a cause of conflict, could become an occasion for collaboration. It was true sixty years ago, in conditions much worse than the present ones, it can be true today as well.

### **2.3. *Religious Practice and secularisation***

The crisis might however have further surprises in store for us. While technological society, *weak in terms of ideals*, tends to expel the religious sense, it is not impossible that the current stalemate could open up to a return of the transcendent. What direction are we going in here? The data are as contradictory as they could be. Benedict XVI focuses relentlessly on the worrying weakening of religious practice in Europe, a phenomenon from which even the Muslim communities of the Continent do not seem to be exempt, according to various sociological studies. And yet the existence of realities that do not accord with this diagnosis is an equally evident sign – as, in my opinion, can be clearly observed in the United Kingdom as well. On the other hand, where the Muslim majority countries are concerned, religious practice seems to have reached one of the highest levels of their entire history, to the point that recently the jurist Yadh Ben Achour stigmatized what he defined as “religious indigestion”. All the more surprising, then, to hear the diagnosis of various analysts, among them the Tunisian scholar Abdel Majid Charfi, who spoke at the Oasis Committee this year of a secularisation, indeed of a ‘rampant’ secularisation, though masked behind a façade of formal religious practice. I believe that a serious inquiry on this issue among both Christians and Muslims, would be of the greatest interest. Are we in a position to advance a detailed hypothesis on the so-called secularisation process, which in reality presents marked differences depending on the nation and the region in question, or do we adopt as our categories those of the finalistic reading of modernity, perhaps placing ourselves in opposition to it? As men of the religions, are we anti-modern or post-modern?

### **2.4. *Ethical priorities***

Finally, there is the area which might perhaps be the first to occur to people, I mean that of ethical questions. I have deliberately left it to the end, to avoid reducing the whole practice of the encounter between Christians and Muslims to the identification of some particular shared values that need to be protected. Without denying the value of such an approach, we need to recognise that by itself it would be restrictive on account of its essentially defensive nature. Nonetheless, it remains true that on numerous ethical questions Christians and Muslims, together with many other men and women, believers or not, can and so must work together, all the more so in that problems often manifest in almost identical ways in different places. The “controversy about the *humanum*” of which John Paul II spoke could eventuate in what Lewis called “the abolition of man”, and it would be absurd in a pluralist society to refuse to allow one single voice to be heard whenever possible. What is at stake is too important for us to allow ourselves such a luxury.