

## *Free Contributions*



# Inductive-theological Notes on Religious Pluralism in a Passage of the Abu Dhabi Declaration

*Addressing the Relationship between Christianity and (Sunni-) Islam*

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### Abstract

The theological question of the recognition of the legitimacy of ‘other’ religious traditions is today a relevant issue not only for the religious sciences, but also for politics and those dealing with social issues. This contribution deals with this issue starting from some considerations of the Abu Dhabi Declaration, signed by Pope Francis and Imam Ahmad al-Tayeb, in which there is a bold statement on the theological goodness of religious pluralism. This statement is re-read in a sapiential key and with an inductive and experiential theological perspective.

### Keywords

Abu Dhabi Document – inductive theology – identity and otherness – inter-faith hermeneutics – religious and theological pluralism;



“Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word ‘dialogue’”<sup>1</sup>



## 1 Introduction

The issue of multi-religious coexistence closely questions many global and European contexts. It is a multifaceted issue with a directly theological and spiritual dimension. In basic terms, we could ask ourselves how a religion of revelation can cultivate a positive and legitimising outlook towards another religious tradition. The issue becomes even more complicated when this question takes place between Abrahamic traditions that are interconnected for historical, linguistic and theological reasons.<sup>2</sup> In this contribution<sup>3</sup> we aspire to comment on this passage of the Abu Dhabi Declaration<sup>4</sup> where, to establish freedom as everyone’s right also in their religious sphere, a positive value is given to pluralism and to the diversity of religions as well as the differences in colour, sex, race and language.

The question that the text of the Declaration puts to Catholic theology is how to combine the claim of a wise will of God who appears to have envisaged a plurality of religious paths, and the – double and unitary – claim of the necessity of the Christian mission and the uniqueness of the Christian revelation, as manifested in Jesus’ messianic path.

Freedom is a right of every person: each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His

1 Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 198.

2 Cf. Silverstein/Stroumsa, *The Oxford Handbook*.

3 In this contribution, I take up and develop some of the reflections made in *Rivista di Teologia dell’Evangelizzazione*, whose editors I thank most sincerely.

4 The *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, also known as the *Abu Dhabi declaration* is a joint statement signed by Pope Francis of the Catholic Church and Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, on 4 February 2019 in Abu Dhabi. The document was born of a fraternal open discussion between Francis and Al-Tayyeb, and is concerned with how different faiths can live peaceably in the same world, and it is meant to be a guide and a support on advancing a culture of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

wisdom, through which He created human beings. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives. Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept.<sup>5</sup>

The theological debate is vast<sup>6</sup> but the interpretation we propose for this passage of the Abu Dhabi Declaration does not immediately take a systemic approach to understand which Christian theology paradigm the text resembles most in order to place it in that specific theological frame. Instead, we chose to explore the background behind the passage, looking for trajectories which can interpret the text with a new perspective and explain some of its implications, including systemic ones. In other words, this article does not look directly at the Christian theology of pluralism. Rather, it looks at what happens theologically<sup>7</sup> – and spiritually – speaking, when members of the Christian tradition thoroughly interact with texts, traditions, and people of different religions. Of course, in taking this kind of approach – which I call “inductive” – it is necessary to be aware that such interreligious interaction – personal and collective – always takes place in context, i.e. within a given human, social and political framework.<sup>8</sup> Using the conceptualisation of figure and background, our reflection starts from hermeneutic considerations to develop a few points which can make up a sort of interpretive horizon (a background) to highlight the style and the sense of the message of the Abu Dhabi Declaration (a figure). For the sake of clarity: in the article I reflect from a perspective that is rooted – with an open approach – in the Catholic theological tradition. Certainly, this perspective matures in a confessional context, but at every stage of its elaboration it has been dialogically engaging with other-faith and secular contexts. While I take personal responsibility for what I write, I often use ‘we’ to indicate that many reflections have emerged out of a dialogical and plural exchange.

5 Pope Francis/Al-Tayyeb, *Document on Human Fraternity*.

6 Cf. Dehn et al., *Handbuch Theologie der Religionen* and Molari, *Teologia delle religioni e del dialogo interreligioso*, pp. 1554–1578.

7 For insights in this direction: Polak, *Between Theological Ideals and Empirical Realities*, pp. 274–292.

8 Interesting remarks on these aspects in Lehmann, *Interreligious Dialogue in Context*, pp. 237–254.

## 2 Preliminary Hermeneutic Considerations and a Limit

To make some interpretive considerations, we need to assess the document at hand. First, it is not a solely intra-Catholic document in which the tenets of the Catholic faith are presented to the believers. Instead, the text is the result of a close dialogue between two different religious and linguistic traditions. It is of course signed by the Bishop of Rome, which makes it hardly irrelevant to the Catholic world, but it is co-signed by an important authority in Sunni Islam. It is therefore a mixed document, designed and written alongside the believers of a different religious tradition, and a Catholic interpreter of the text will need the right hermeneutics for this type of joint declaration.

A second aspect should also be considered. The declaration poses theological and interpretive issues to both theologies precisely because it straddles the boundary, as it were, between two millenary theological and religious traditions.<sup>9</sup> Both traditions which meet and interact in this text carry in their respective DNAs a claim of conclusiveness and absoluteness. According to the Christian faith, Jesus, the Messiah born out of the Jewish people, is God's son, sent in the Father's Spirit as the saviour and the eschatological revealer. Jesus is understood by Catholic theology as God's definitive word, and rightly so, we as Christians may add.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Islam believes that Mohammed is the last prophet, who fulfils the prophecy, and that the Quran holds the true and unparalleled revelation. The Abu Dhabi Declaration therefore is quite exceptional: two religious traditions, both intrinsically convinced of holding the ultimate divine truth<sup>11</sup> convene and strive to find the right words to delicately balance together the duty of their identity, the courage of otherness and the sincerity of their intentions.<sup>12</sup> We are dealing with a liminal text which opens itself up to the other while aiming for sincerity and transparency, without giving up its theological identity.

A third observation concerns the context in which the text was written. The historical, social, theological and cultural backdrop of the declaration is one of harsh conflict, featuring a series of deadly clashes, terrorist attacks, fundamentalist and extremely violent experiments by some states,<sup>13</sup> and colonial and neo-colonial practices throughout the past forty years. Such events find their roots *also* in both the Christian and the Islamic theological discourse,

9 Madigan, *Il dialogo teologico con l'Islam*, pp. 432–442.

10 Cf. *Letter to the Hebrews* 1:1–3.

11 Cf. Scarcia Amoretti, *Il Corano. Una lettura*, pp. 223–240.

12 Cf. Pope Francis, *Address to the Participants in the International Peace Conference*.

13 For a first introduction: Wright, *The Terror Years*; Warrick, *Black Flags* and Del Grande, *Dawla*.

and in the complex interaction between these two discourses. The document we are analysing is therefore a form of dialogue born of a joint discussion that acknowledges its unstable and broken socio-political and religious background. A background that urgently needs the right words to settle its conflicts and to reconcile different faiths and peoples.<sup>14</sup> For these reasons, this text should be interpreted as an “emergency declaration” with the strong ethical purpose of fighting hostility and *taking care of the world*<sup>15</sup> – which does not take anything away from its theological dimension.

A fourth element considers the sources and the theologies of each tradition which can have a role in supporting a positive view of diversity and plurality, even when it comes to religion, through a solid theological basis. Without going deep into the analysis, we can recall a few facts. Regarding Islam, several passages of the Quran – e.g., Q. 2, 256; Q. 10, 99; Q. 49, 13 or Q. 109, 6 – and other texts of the tradition refer to the principle of difference as a sign of God’s mercy. Such principle has often been used in Islam as an argument to justify the disagreements among Doctors of the Law as being a manifestation of God’s providential will. This principle, however, is not entirely conclusive because the disagreements that it justifies are those which occur within the same religion – this is where some ambiguities can come up. Nonetheless, it may be said that some texts, traditions, and hermeneutic tools in the Islamic world allow for a tolerant,<sup>16</sup> sometimes even positive, interpretation of religious diversity, just as other texts and interpretations go the opposite direction.<sup>17</sup> A similar process is to be found in the Biblical and in the Christian traditions: several texts allow for a tolerant and sometimes positive view of religious otherness, but some texts and practices express very different stances. As a simple example of a positive interpretation, we may quote a well-known passage from one of John Paul II’s encyclicals, where he brings forward the ancient doctrine of *semina Verbi*:<sup>18</sup>

14 Cf. Hinze, *The Grace of Conflict*, pp. 40–64.

15 Cf. Pulcini, *Care of the World Fear*.

16 Cf. Said, *Vie islamiche alla non violenza* and Said, *Madhab ibn Ādam al-awwal*.

17 Cf. Charif, *Tatawwur mafhum al-jihad fi al-fikr al-islami*.

18 Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, n. 28: “The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time. The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the *seeds of the Word*, to be found in human initiatives – including religious ones – and in mankind’s efforts to attain truth, goodness and God himself”.

The Spirit, therefore, is at the very source of man's existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of his being. *The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions.*<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, in the Christian tradition, too, we find interpretations, which can support the views expressed in this passage of the Abu Dhabi Declaration which not only recognises one single religion as positive but also considers the possibility that a theological action may operate through other religious paths as well. For both communities, the Abu Dhabi joint declaration is based on an internal hermeneutic effort to find textual and interpretive resources, both theological and spiritual which can potentially acknowledge not only the other and the legitimacy of their different religious belief, but also a theologically supported positivity of their religious and spiritual life. It is a meeting in writing, at the boundary, between two religions which – for spiritual and ethical reasons<sup>20</sup> – explore their respective traditions to find those resources which can support a shared position.

A fifth necessary step is to recognise a limit of the document's perspective. In a crucial passage it states that:

Moreover, we resolutely declare that religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood. These tragic realities are the consequence of a deviation from religious teachings.<sup>21</sup>

Numerous exegetical, historical and theological analyses have abundantly shown that this statement is, so to speak, naive. In the sense that in the founding texts, in their interpretations and in numerous historical testimonies, the Abrahamic religious traditions have been able to show an aggressive and violent face in the name of God. Often in the interpretative traditions there is a real conflict of interpretations around this issue, which should certainly be better clarified in official statements. In any case, in the Abu Dhabi declaration there is a clear intention – with a clear sense of responsibility for our times – to exclude any violent, aggressive, belligerent bent. However, it would be a quantum leap if a dialogue document tried to explain why Jewish, Christian

19 Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, n. 28 (emphasis added).

20 Pope Francis, *Interreligious Meeting*.

21 Pope Francis/Al-Tayyeb, *Document on Human Fraternity*.

and Muslim sacred texts use violent language in abundance.<sup>22</sup> The failure to go into sufficient detail is understandable in the logic of the processes to be supported, in which not all the difficult issues can be tackled at the same time.<sup>23</sup>

The last step in our analysis deals with the type of theological perspective used in the Declaration, as it states: “The pluralism and the diversity of religions [...] are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings. This divine wisdom is the source”. In the Arabic text the word *حكمة* is used to refer to God the creator’s design and wise will,<sup>24</sup> a term which is recalled by the corresponding *חוכמה* and *σοφία*, with all due distinctions. This terminology exists in the Hebrew Bible, in the Christian Bible and in the Quran, and is linked to a multi-faceted tradition in – at least – all three Abrahamic religions, with several levels of interpretation and re-interpretation.<sup>25</sup> It is important to point out that the excerpt of the Abu Dhabi Declaration refers to the linguistic, spiritual and theological world of wisdom. First and foremost, this world entails a dimension where divinity is the source: God the creator’s wisdom works in different ways in the creation, in history and in mankind.<sup>26</sup> There is a movement from above through which wisdom represents and describes a fundamental quality of God<sup>27</sup> and sometimes becomes the very presence and revelation of God.<sup>28</sup> Reasoning about wisdom also entails a movement which we could describe as coming from below, with an anthropological and methodological dimension: wisdom is indeed the object of the human quest.<sup>29</sup> This quest consists of different steps and learning methods. Wisdom spurs on, makes aware (Ecclesiastes), inhabits and transforms the human heart, and puts it in touch with God’s mystery and design.<sup>30</sup> In this dynamic tension between the presence and the work of God’s wisdom – God being wise –, and the human quest for that very wisdom, an important space opens up for dialogue among Men, for a quest that is not solipsistic, but rather dynamic and interactive. There is

22 Cf. Stefani, *Guerra e pace in nome di Dio*.

23 Probably a minimum step forward was made in the recent document on fraternity and social friendship: Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 282: “We believers are challenged to return to our sources, in order to concentrate on what is essential: worship of God and love for our neighbors, lest some of our teachings, taken out of context, end up feeding forms of contempt, hatred, xenophobia or negation of others. The truth is that violence has no basis in our fundamental religious convictions, but only in their distortion”.

24 Cf. Goichon, *Hikma*, p. 377 et seq.

25 Cf. Kynes, *The Oxford Handbook of Wisdom*.

26 Cf. de Francesco, *Alcune note sul testo arabo*, pp. 79–82.

27 *Quran* 2: 129.151.

28 *Sirach* 24.

29 *Book of Wisdom* 6:12–21.

30 *Book of Wisdom* 7:22–8:1.

a polarity between God's design revealing itself and human search, opening up a space which gives value to a trial-and-error approach,<sup>31</sup> to experience, to history and to human interaction. This joint human search can sometimes be understood as the way in which wisdom manifests itself. In other words, sometimes wisdom is a path, it is a method as well as a starting point and a destination. It appears that this use of the language of wisdom is no coincidence, but rather a clue<sup>32</sup> that helps develop a more plastic reflexion on the interpretive horizon of the Abu Dhabi Declaration.

### 3 Horizons

For these simple hermeneutic remarks, we can assume that the sapiential and experiential dimension is a possible perspective through which to understand the document's message. We therefore intend to reflect on a few aspects which make it possible to apply a sapiential approach to the dialogue between religious traditions and which can help systematic theology formulate its hypotheses. We are alluding to some issues to do with the theological and vital interreligious dialogue as seen through a Christian perspective. These are aspects that outline a hermeneutic horizon and that we can summarize here as: the development of a historical *and* theological interest; a sense of the modalities of (re)reading the Scriptures and the tradition; a sacramental understanding of the ecclesial community that involves a specific interpretation of the Church's fundamental evangelizing duty; the exploration of different religious and cultural traditions while protecting – and often enriching – one's own faith; the relevance of a deontology of interreligious dialogue and hermeneutics; the theological and hermeneutic value of proximity and friendship (personal and social).<sup>33</sup> They seem to us to be elements which, being at the crossroads between theological reflection, sapiential research and the concrete practice of dialogue between religions, are capable of combining an approach from above and an approach from below, or, in other words, a theology in a state of listening and dialogue with the great tradition and a theology in a state of listening and dialogue with its own context.<sup>34</sup> Such elements can – perhaps – help us to better understand the framework (the background) in which to place and properly interpret the Abu Dhabi text (the figure) in such

31 Cf. *Acts of the Apostles* 17:27.

32 Cf. Lavaggetto, *Lavorare con piccoli indizi*.

33 Cf. Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 99.

34 Cf. Mandreoli, *Appunti per "scuole" di teologia*, pp. 91–105.



a way that the dialogue can remain open and fair, be creatively faithful to its own tradition and glimpse prospects for theological development.

### 3.1 *Hermeneutics: History and Theology*

One aspect has to do with the assessment of the historical dimension in the interreligious dialogue. It is not about taking note of the pluralism that does exist in religious traditions, it is rather about having a different spiritual attitude which allows to learn from experience and from a thorough analysis of history, past and present. This is the issue concerning the difficult acquisition of an awareness of historical evolution within the various theological traditions.<sup>35</sup> A meaningful example of such a perspective can be found on a page of the *Acts of the Apostles* where, after some apostles stood before the Sanhedrin to be judged, Gamaliel speaks up.<sup>36</sup> This excerpt is well-known and is a defence of the apostles based on a theology of history that Gamaliel, as described in the *Acts*, applies to the Christian movement: history has witnessed many religious movements – even messianic movements – which came to nothing because they were of a solely human nature, but in the long run history could show phenomena which could be rooted in God's wise will.<sup>37</sup> Gamaliel's conclusion is extremely prudent: for the aforementioned reasons, these phenomena should be handled with care and with a sense of anticipation. Of course, the context is quite specific, as this theology of history is applied to a burgeoning Christianity, but one may wonder if a meeting among people from different millenary religious traditions may lead to questions such as: what does this rich and long religious tradition mean? What is the theological meaning of the fruits this tradition has been bearing in the lives of men and women for generations? Does their long traditions mean that God works in their hearts and in their religious lives?<sup>38</sup> Gamaliel's question can be linked to a consideration

35 Cf. Lonergan, *The Transition*, pp. 3–10.

36 *Acts of the Apostles* 5:34–39: "But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honoured by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: 'Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God'".

37 Cf. Marguerat, *Gli Atti degli apostoli 1*, pp. 219–227.

38 Cf. Dupuis, *The Spirit*, pp. 27–31 and O'Connell, *Do Not Stifle the Spirit*.

that has existed for decades in contemporary Catholic theology. Among the remarks of authors who deal with the question of the theological pertinence of the quality of the time that passes, we shall recall something Gislain Lafont wrote about twenty years ago:<sup>39</sup>

The “time after Jesus Christ” reaches today the duration of the “time before Jesus Christ”, if Abraham’s migration did take place at the turn of the year 2000 before our era.

For Lafont, this consideration of the theological density of time also implies leaving the “principle of perfection” for the “principle of imperfection”. Otherwise, we would fall back into a way of thinking which is not open to a dialogue with cultural dynamics and which would rather protect a trove of immutable truths than wonder about the theological meaning of history, before or after Christ. Speaking of a “principle of imperfection” or of “progressive perfection”<sup>40</sup> means recognising that, in the lives of the Church and of humanity, time as the place where the salvific exchange takes place, should be taken seriously by theology. To Christ’s insuperable gift of Himself, history is not a mere neutral zone where only the individual’s personal/inner acceptance (or refusal) of God’s salvation would take place. Instead, what becomes conceivable is that several steps would come one after the other to make up a gradual and “exact putting into perspective of God, Man and the world, not only when it comes to knowing, but also when it comes to doing and, ultimately, of being”.<sup>41</sup> When considering time as the “positive vector of the effective penetration of the Paschal Mystery into Man’s life”,<sup>42</sup> the permanent presence of other salvific perspectives<sup>43</sup> should also be taken into serious account. Recognising the fact that “duration is essentially marked by the Judaeo-Christian revelation” should not prevent from recognising that it

is also traversed by other quests, in some ways aberrant, in others authentic, conducted with the aim of formulating and living Man’s fundamental

39 Cf. Gianotti, *Salvezza cristiana*, pp. 21–35.

40 Cf. Lafont, *Modelli di teologia*, p. 365.

41 Cf. Lafont, *Modelli di teologia*, p. 365.

42 Cf. Lafont, *Modelli di teologia*, p. 390.

43 Cf. Lafont, *Piccolo saggio*, p. 29: “Before Jesus Christ, there were, and still are, religions, and therefore rituals, stories and sapiential reflections that have marked the practice and thought of men in search of salvation. We do not know why, but mercy needs its time. Not everything happens and not everything has happened at the same time, so much so that there are different religious spaces”.

desire [...]. The return of Christ will mark the completion of all trajectories, at the end of their encounters, intersections, controversies, reconciliations, adventures that the risen one will have accompanied with his Spirit, both to facilitate their divine-human unfolding, and to make up for the missteps, the excesses and perhaps even the timidities, with endless patience.<sup>44</sup>

Such perspective requires a wise interpretation of history that is open to the questions that encounter, millenary traditions and historic events may pose, and assumes as its principle not only perfection – the perfection of Jesus' revelation – but also imperfection – for instance, the imperfection of the revelation that occurred wholly in Jesus but was never completely understood and carried out in all its dimensions. Of course, this perspective – which is a first important element of the horizon – should not be applied mechanically, as if everything that lasts in history has a permanent value, but it is certainly an aid to paying attention to the paths and routes that stretch through time.

### 3.2 *Interpreting Scripture and Traditions*

A second point has to do with the relevance of the ways of interpreting one's Scriptures and Tradition in dialogue with the interpretation of the texts of other traditions.<sup>45</sup> The starting point is thinking of the experience of faith as a story that provides sense, i.e. a meaning, a direction, a way of feeling and perceiving. The story thus creates a horizon through which to understand reality at a personal and collective, community level. We use the word "horizon" here to mean

the bounding circle, the line at which earth and sky appear to meet. This line is the limit of one's field of vision. As one moves about, it recedes in front and closes in behind so that, for different standpoints, there are different horizons. Moreover, for each different standpoint and horizon, there are different divisions of the totality of visible objects. Beyond the horizon lie the objects that, at least for the moment, cannot be seen. Within the horizon lie the objects that can now be seen.<sup>46</sup>

44 Cf. Lafont, *Modelli di teologia*, p. 391.

45 Cf. Clooney, *Reading Religiously*, p. 42 and an interesting example in Stefani, *Bibbia e Corano, un confronto*.

46 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, pp. 235–236.

It is within this story-horizon which represents the experience of faith – and, more widely speaking, the experience of man positioning himself in the world of meaning – that we find the fundamental relation with the Sacred Scriptures and the great tradition within which the text reaches Man and the community which reads it. It is the evangelic question about one's relation to one's religious tradition: "How do you read it?"<sup>47</sup> The way the reading happens – be it personal or communitarian, synchronic or diachronic – turns out to be crucial in every religious tradition to express the quality of one's faith and for the way it links faith, identity and coexistence in a peaceful or hostile way. We are thinking at the level of the constitutive meanings which mediate and give meaning to the individuals, the communities and the peoples' relation to reality. Indeed, "a community is not just a number of men within a geographical frontier. It is an achievement of common meaning [...]"<sup>48</sup> A believer's reading of the Sacred Scripture is a powerful agent of this common horizon and meaning. From this decisive turning point, we can recall some possible paths which help interpret tradition faithfully and open-mindedly. Most of these paths are inspired by the *Dei Verbum* Constitution of the Second Vatican Council<sup>49</sup> which contains a precise and prospective reflection on the historical forms of revelation and the ways of understanding Scripture.<sup>50</sup> Within this framework, the seven vectors, that we are going to present, can help identify another horizon element, when taken in a Christian context, within the interreligious dialogue with and on other traditions' texts.<sup>51</sup>

The first vector consists in giving value to a resource that is present in every Sacred Scripture: the multiform call for a change in life and mentality.<sup>52</sup> Each scripture of the three monotheistic traditions interprets man and social life as highly in need of repentance, change and reform. The call for conversion implies a possible disclosure which can lead to rethinking and renewing one's interpretation patterns. This can open paths which allow to disambiguate different perspectives found in the texts according to a vision which is less rigid and more open to a potential change of point of view. In other words, the

47 *Gospel of Luke* 10:26.

48 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 79.

49 The constitution *Dei verbum* (translated: the word, the speaking, of God) is a crucial text of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) in which it deals with: the theological and historical identity of Christian revelation, the interpretation of the Bible (Old and New Testament) and the importance of the biblical text for the life of the Church.

50 Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible*.

51 Cf. Cornille/Conway, *Interreligious Hermeneutics* and Rizzi, *Le ermeneutiche dei testi sacri*, pp. 137–170.

52 Cf. Körner, *Political Religion*, pp. 43–87.

fact that many communities read the Sacred Scriptures in a way that incites an internal change and a renewal in collective behaviour can be a valuable resource leading to further dialogue, coexistence and more authenticity, although it doesn't happen without sustained attention.

A second path can lead to the necessary rethinking of the idea of an objective interpretation. When we say that a person or a community understands and proclaims the truth "objectively", this is a claim of truthfulness for that specific interpretation or interpretive tradition. Although this claim should be understood as an important identifying element of that world or tradition, we often establish that such "objectivity" of the truth is accepted in a usually unreal frame which is detached from all human individuals and their experiences, from the community and its evolution in time, and, more generally, from the historic dimension of the text and of its infinite interpretations. That is how the idea arises that the objectivity of the truth goes beyond the interpretation, instead of being a form of interpretation, albeit certainly a particularly significant or normative form of it. This idea clearly contradicts thousands of volumes written across the centuries that contain interpretations which are respected but different across time and space. The question is how to read and believe the Sacred Scripture while being aware that the text, being a text, is necessarily the object of an interpretation which has to include a certain philological, historical, critical and hermeneutical dimension.<sup>53</sup> The resource, in this case, is an accurate knowledge of the traditions of interpretation of the Scriptures in their evolutionary dimension as well as their dimensions of discontinuity.

The third vector has to do with what emerges from the analysis of the historical dimension of the text,<sup>54</sup> from its interpretation and the way the community of believers receives it. It is about the extremely complex theme of the purification of memory. In simple terms, by "purification of memory" we mean that every religious tradition, together with what it considers its glowing nucleus of truth, good and holiness, will have built itself on contaminated land: facts, contexts and representations that have derailed or sometimes hurt the community of believers and the human community. This purification implies that every religious culture should know its history free from ideologies or apologetics, recognising the events, the representations, the debris and the obscuring factors in order to understand how these elements lead to short-circuiting interpretations with violent, authoritarian and homicidal drifts. Such purification of one's legacy is only possible through a reading of the Scriptures which

53 de Prémare, *Alle origini del Corano*.

54 Cf. Sinai, *Historical-Critical Readings*, pp. 209–225.

is simultaneously believing and responsible: the knowledge of history and its tensions requires a sense of responsibility, on the one hand to recognise the paths to violence and overpowering, and on the other hand to find other interpreting criteria and to respond to the accusation – which can be a useful incentive to reflect – directed at religions, mostly but not exclusively monotheistic, of begetting violence. In that sense, the movement of purification of memory and of responsible interpretation leads to a careful re-questioning of one's sources and traditions – towards a re-design of the *memories of the future* present in the Scriptures<sup>55</sup> – to find resources for different, more peaceful interpretations which advocate a possible coexistence.

All of this leads us to a fourth path involving a non-violent interpretation of one's Sacred Scripture which does not discredit the others. Aware of the challenge presented by such a reinterpretation, for the very nature of the texts – where it is not rare for “good” and “evil” to be particularly intertwined – we believe some of Bergoglio's words to the Al-Azhar Institution may be useful:

Especially in our day, the religions are called to respect this imperative, since, for all our need of the Absolute, it is essential that we reject any “absolutizing” that would justify violence. For violence is the negation of every authentic religious expression. As religious leaders, we are called, therefore, to unmask the violence that masquerades as purported sanctity and is based more on the “absolutizing” of selfishness than on authentic openness to the Absolute. We have an obligation to denounce violations of human dignity and human rights, to expose attempts to justify every form of hatred in the name of religion, and to condemn these attempts as idolatrous caricatures of God: Holy is his name, he is the God of peace.<sup>56</sup>

This ability to discern implies an effort of de-solidarization between the believer's perspective and the numerous elements (social, emotional, symbolic) of identification such as land, ethnicity, cultural and national identity. When God's absoluteness sympathises with representations of power,<sup>57</sup> and historical, political and identity powers, violence is never far behind. The link between violence and religion affects many aspects of the social and

55 Cf. Jedlowski, *Memorie del futuro*.

56 Pope Francis, *Address to the participants in the International Peace Conference*.

57 Cf. Appel, *L'alterità fraterna*, pp. 191–200; Appel, *Critiques of Master-Representations*, pp. 14–39, cf. also Schmidinger, *Jihadismus*.

personal spheres and requires a new effort to read the Scriptures through a non-violent lens.<sup>58</sup>

A fifth vector recognises how in this re-interpretation an approach which is suited to the Scriptures is increasingly decisive. The Sacred Scripture and its interpretive tradition are respected when they are not asked to perform an impossible task. In this context, Mohammed Arkoun's differentiation between the thought, the unthought and the unthinkable<sup>59</sup> is particularly useful. This differentiation arises in an Islamic context, in Quranic studies, but it can be extremely useful in any religious interpretive context, as it helps pose a crucial question: does the Sacred or traditional Text contain the whole possible world, as a detailed map, or is it just an indicative – and authoritative – guide to every aspect of the world? Indeed, in every Sacred Text we find a series of questions “thought” and studied thoroughly “with the help of the mental tools available in a linguistic community of a certain era”. At the same time, because of its authoritativeness that goes beyond time, the Text cannot contain that which is not part of this intellectual-linguistic scheme, which is why history poses some questions through its evolution which remain “unthought” by the Text. This leads to two possible behaviours. One considers the Text an inspiration which can help understand the questions that different situations throughout history pose to the reading community. The other defends the “thought” as the only possible expression, therefore considering the “unthought” as “unthinkable”. In this case, it is impossible to tackle new questions because everything is in the text and these questions cannot/must not be thinkable. They remain therefore normatively unthinkable for that community. “Opening up to the unthought and making it thinkable”: it is difficult to imagine a more useful tool for communities dealing with the interpretation of Scripture, of their faith and therefore of themselves as relating to the world around them.<sup>60</sup>

In this context, a sixth vector has to do with the claim of veracity of every religious tale in relation to the Other. Indeed, every tradition has its own relation to the truth, that it believes to be unveiled and communicated through its original revelation. Here we find another important case which turns up several times in interreligious dialogue and that we can simply express as follows: within one's relation to one's own tradition, how should the Other be interpreted, in its various ethnical, religious and human forms?<sup>61</sup> It is a com-

58 Cf. Pope Francis, *Interreligious meeting*.

59 Cf. Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran*; Arkoun, *The Unthought* and Arkoun/Benzine/Schlegel, *La construction humaine*.

60 Arkoun, *The Unthought*, p. 46.

61 Cf. Bar-Asher, *Les Juifs dans le Coran* and Bar-Asher, *Nessuna coercizione nella fede*, pp. 165–171. Cf also Said, *Lā ikrāha fī al-dīn*.

plex issue which involves many aspects, of which we shall mention at least three. First, the “internal” aspect: what is the approach to be had with a different interpretation within one’s own tradition and community? Second, a more “external” aspect: how should a non-faith or another faith be interpreted? Third, the social, anthropological and political structure within which the Scriptures and the tradition are read: the interpretation of the texts changes depending on the socio-political and ethnical context. The way of reading changes profoundly when the communities are in a situation of majority, of social and cultural hegemony, as opposed to being a minority in a pluralistic context. This relationship with otherness becomes important – and could create also tensions – when the Other or the context which is external to the believing community applies criteria which can enrich the reading and the understanding of the text itself.<sup>62</sup>

A last vector to be explored in relation to the interpretation of Scriptures requires a certain awareness of one’s historical period.<sup>63</sup> In Christian tradition, this idea is well represented by the Parable of the Weeds in the Gospel of Matthew,<sup>64</sup> which shows how necessary it is to remember in which time we live. In history, we are in the time preceding God’s judgement, therefore without even considering the fundamental tradition according to which the judgement will be merciful as mentioned in some passages of monotheistic Scriptures, no ultimate judgement can be pronounced by mankind. When reading the texts with their respective implementations, one should therefore retain the crucial difference between ultimate and penultimate, avoiding the absolutization of that which is relative and avoiding condemnations or strict and definitive theological assessments on the Other. It should be added that the parable of the Weeds is in keeping with what we said about eschatological judgement and history. However, there are two sides to every coin: this parable may be understood as a refutation of the principle of duration. In fact, even the Weeds remain until the end. In the face of an interpretation based on the

62 Cf. O’Donnell Polyakov, *Antisemitism*.

63 Cf. Wirén, *Hope and Otherness*.

64 *The Gospel of Matthew* 13:24–30: “He proposed another parable to them: The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everyone was asleep his enemy came and sowed weeds all through the wheat, and then went off. When the crop grew and bore fruit, the weeds appeared as well. The slaves of the householder came to him and said, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where have the weeds come from?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ His slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ He replied, ‘No, if you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. Let them grow together until harvest; then at harvest time I will say to the harvesters, ‘First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles for burning; but gather the wheat into my barn’”.



“Gamaliel principle”, the parable is an invitation to caution. We can say that the “Gamaliel principle” is binding on the negative side, i.e. the rejection of violence in order to crush alterity, but it is problematic on the affirmative side if it is understood in an uncritical way as giving credence to duration as such.

In any case, the awareness of one’s time and one’s limitations is only possible when the text is perceived as the space for the spiritual relation of the believer/community with God. It is the spiritual dimension which always runs the risk of being compromised by the apologetics of obviousness, of perfect rationality or by a conformist and defensive mindset. We then come across the question we suggested in the first vector, about the quality of the inner experience of those men and women who turn themselves towards God’s mystery. Man’s spiritual experience should be closely explored<sup>65</sup> to understand the following: what does it mean to pray as an individual and as a community? What does it mean to listen to the voice of conscience, to the Scriptures and to God, and to reply to him? What are the criteria for discerning the authenticity of religious experience?<sup>66</sup>

It is the question about the spiritual experience understood as that particular form of “knowledge”, of wisdom, which entails “creating a situation where Man is involved not only through his intelligence, but also through his freedom, his conscience, his love, his desire, the whole sense of his life, and his sensitivity”.<sup>67</sup> The absence of a spiritual dimension stifles the dimension of otherness and results in a theological, political or social vision which is idolatrous and easily influenced. A non-ideological reading of the text is therefore necessary, where a deep faith or a mystical faith becomes decisive, where

he or she is a mystic who cannot stop walking and, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is not that; one cannot stay there nor be content with that. Desire creates an excess. Places are exceeded, passed, lost behind it. It makes one go further, elsewhere. It lives nowhere.<sup>68</sup>

Of course, these are elementary observations – originating in a Christian context that engages in inter-religious dialogue – which help one to re-read one’s

65 Appel, *Rivolgersi al Dio assente*, pp. 17–42.

66 Cf. Friday, *Discerning Criteria of Religious Experience*, pp. 95–110.

67 Moioli, *L’esperienza spirituale*, p. 51 et seq.

68 de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, p. 299.

own Scriptures and traditions in close dialogue with the Scriptures and traditions of others.<sup>69</sup>

### 3.3 *The Hermeneutic Community*<sup>70</sup>

What has been said so far implies a third notation of an ecclesiological nature, since such interpretative perspectives on tradition open up a certain type of ecclesial positioning. To understand this perspective, let us recall a passage by Michel de Certeau:

*One must be realistic. The Church is a society. Now, every society defines itself by what it excludes. It shapes itself by differentiation. To form a group is to create outsiders. There is here a bipolar structure, which is essential to every society: it creates an "outside" so that there may be an "among us", it creates borders so that an inner country may be outlined, it creates "others" so that an "us" may take shape. This law is also a principle of elimination and intolerance. It leads to domination in the name of a truth defined by the group. In order to defend oneself against the outsider, one absorbs him or isolates him. Conquistary pacificar: two identical terms for the ancient Spanish conquistadores. But do we not do the same, albeit with the presumption of understanding others and, in the field of ethnology for example, of identifying them with what we know about them and what (we think) we know better than them? Precisely because it is also a society, albeit of a particular kind, the Church is always tempted to contradict what it states, to defend itself, to obey this law that excludes or oppresses outsiders, to identify the truth with what it says about it, to count the "good" according to its visible members, to reduce God to nothing more than the justification and the "idol" of an existing group. History shows that this temptation is real. This poses a serious problem: is it possible for a society to bear witness to God and not just make God its possession?<sup>71</sup>*

This excerpt by the French anthropologist proposes a historical and theological diagnosis about the Church as a fraternal body that gives form to an "us", and by virtue of that it necessarily postulates the existence of a "non-us", the existence of "others". The question underlying this analysis could be formulated as follows: how is it possible to sustain communally the eschatological truth of the revelation that took place through Jesus's story and live alongside

69 Cf. Cornille, *Meaning and* and Clooney/von Stosch, *How to do comparative theology*.

70 Cf. Repole, *L'umiltà della Chiesa*.

71 de Certeau, *Lo straniero*, p. 16 (our translation and emphasis added).

other forms and claims to truth, maybe even with equally absolute claims? It is a question that allows us to better understand not only the message of the Abu Dhabi document, but also many issues relating to the role of Christianity today in various parts of the world, including Europe.<sup>72</sup> It seems to us that a theological tool that generated from Second Vatican Council that can still deploy much interpretative potential is that of the Church as a sacrament.<sup>73</sup> The theological prehistory and history of this idea and its post-Second Vatican Council reception are vast<sup>74</sup> as well as its deep roots within the complex relationship between the *Ecclesia* and the people of Israel.<sup>75</sup> Here we limit ourselves to tracing some trajectories that reflect an effort in understanding the Church as a sacrament. First of all, it is a matter of a historical and non-essentialist understanding of the Church as the people of God in the form of the body of Christ.<sup>76</sup> It takes into account time and space, which are the sphere in which the people of God exist, the cultures that differentiate the peoples which make up one people, and the historical and theological roots of which the sacraments are an eloquent and fundamental sign. It is an understanding that sees the Church as a people shaped by the sacraments – and in particular by the gift of the body and the blood – that inhabits history in a non-totalitarian manner: the Church as a sacrament cannot be thought of as an all-encompassing whole, but as a part of the whole, which has the whole world and the whole of history as its horizon, but does not saturate them. It is therefore part of the sacramental understanding of the Church to be in an open dialogue with the world, because the Church is the sacrament of the salvific dialogue between God and humanity that took place in the mission of Jesus the Messiah.<sup>77</sup> This dialogue can be thought of in the form of a profound sharing of the human condition so that it can also be the seed, instrument and sacrament of salvation.

In this perspective, dialogue and proclamation are profoundly connected, and according to the Christological model no proclamation is conceivable without dialogue, sharing and affection for people. This explains how this sacramental way of the Church to perceive itself does not renounce to the Christological and Trinitarian faith but does not take a fundamentalist or sectarian perspective.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, it is the most fitting historical way of witnessing and proclaiming Jesus, who has fulfilled his own mission *a certain way*. This

72 Cf. Theobald, *Christentum als Stil* and Appel, *The Border of Borders*, pp. 514–528.

73 Cf. Körner, *Political Religion*, pp. 84–87.

74 Cf. Vergottini, *La Chiesa e il Vaticano II*.

75 Cf. Cova/Neri/Norelli, *La Chiesa al posto di Israele?*

76 Cf. Congar, *Un popolo messianico*, p. 75 et seq. and Repole, *Chiesa, popolo di Dio*, pp. 61–84.

77 Cf. Ruggieri, *Esistenza messianica*.

78 Interesting remarks in Appel, *Trinität und Offenheit Gottes*, pp. 19–46.

fidelity to Jesus's path allows the Christian community to be radically faithful to the Gospel and, at the same time, open and in dialogue, listening to its Lord through prayer and reflection, and listening to people in their human and religious quests. In this dialogue, the Church can also experientially grasp the many ways in which God's grace works in people's hearts and, in some ways, at the heart of religious traditions – even if an exhaustive conceptuality may still be lacking. When understood in this way, the revelation preserved and passed on by the ecclesial tradition can never become an ideology of *Christianitas* or a more-or-less-hidden superiority complex. The evangelical heart of the revelation impels the believing community never to become a sect that despises what is outside, or an omnivorous entity that devalues what lies beyond its borders.

At the same time, this sacramental stance which positively acknowledges its own historical limit underpins the ways of the proclamation of the Gospel, which is not thus depowered, but rather rooted in existence and testimony. It is no coincidence that in his speech in Naples in June 2019 Bergoglio recalled a significant passage from the original Franciscan tradition:<sup>79</sup>

I am very struck by the advice given by Francis to his friars: “Preach the Gospel: if necessary, also with words”. [...] This docility to the Spirit implies a style of life and proclamation that is without a spirit of conquest, without a desire to proselytize [...] and without an aggressive intent to disprove the other. An approach that [...], in keeping with the Gospel, also includes witnessing to the point of sacrificing one's own life, as shown by the luminous examples of Charles de Foucauld, the monks of Tibhirine, the bishop of Oran Pierre Claverie and so many brothers and sisters [...].<sup>80</sup>

79 Cf. Pope Francis, *Address to the Theological Faculty of Southern Italy*: “The dialogical way of proceeding is the path to arrive where paradigms, ways of feeling, symbols, and representations of individuals and of peoples are formed. To arrive there – as ‘spiritual ethnographers’, so to speak, of the souls of peoples – to be able to dialogue in depth and, if possible, to contribute to their development with the proclamation of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God [...]. Dialogue and proclamation of the Gospel that can take place in the ways outlined by Francis of Assisi in the *Regula non bullata*, just the day after his trip to the Mediterranean East. For Francis there is a first way in which, simply, one lives as a Christian: ‘One way is that they do not make quarrels or disputes, but are subject to every human creature for the love of God and confess to being Christians’ (xvi: FF 43). Then there is a second way in which, always docile to the signs and actions of the Risen Lord and his Spirit of peace, the Christian faith is proclaimed as a manifestation in Jesus of God's love for all men”.

80 Pope Francis, *Address to the Theological Faculty of Southern Italy*.

This citation shows how the proclamation of the Gospel through one's life and – then – through words needs as its cultural, institutional and spiritual *humus* a proximity capable of recognising the other, based on a sacramental sense of being Church that by its own evangelical persuasion does not need an ecclesial self-perception of superiority or perfection, it does not need to saturate all reality.<sup>81</sup>

### 3.4 *Hermeneutics and Deontology*

A further element of the interpretative horizon concerns the importance of a dialogue between religious traditions that preserves certain ethical perspectives. Indeed, the delicacy of the hermeneutics of texts and traditions in an interreligious key has a dimension linked to the deontology of dialogue.<sup>82</sup> I do use the word deontology because there is a set of personal and social responsibilities inherent in the way one dialogues and interacts with other social and religious actors. In one of his texts, Pope Francis analysed the subject:

Precisely in the field of dialogue, particularly interreligious dialogue, we are constantly called to walk together, in the conviction that the future also depends on the encounter of religions and cultures. In this regard, the work of the *Mixed Committee for Dialogue between the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Committee of Al-Azhar for Dialogue* offers us a concrete and encouraging example. Three basic areas, if properly linked to one another, can assist in this dialogue: *the duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, the courage to accept differences, and sincerity of intentions*.<sup>83</sup>

The passage in the speech presents some ethical dimensions of interreligious dialogue. The first dimension consists in the duty of identity, i.e. rootedness within one's own tradition. One cannot really enter into a dialogue between different religious and cultural perspectives without an awareness of one's own history and how it has shaped one's personal and collective existence. This first dimension excludes the assumption of a liberal perspective that allows issues to be addressed without really addressing their theological roots and concrete social dimensions.

A second dimension is described as the courage of otherness. This is the willingness to come into contact with what is different on a cultural,

81 Cf. Mancini, *Tornino i volti*.

82 Cf. Mandreoli/Cella, *Viaggio intorno al mondo*, pp. 147–149.

83 Pope Francis, *Address to the Participants in the International Peace Conference*.

anthropological and religious level, aware that exposure to what is other can entail changes, imbalances, rethinking, fears, doubts. This is what Bergoglio is talking about when he – often – speaks about the thought that moves on the borders and that reasons in the peripheries. Exposure to the other often dislocates questions and calls into question balances, but it can be a strong help towards maturity and deepening. It requires courage not only because of this healthy destabilization but also because the guest – according to the etymology of the ancient word – whom we host and/or he who hosts us can also turn out to be *hostis*, the enemy.<sup>84</sup> The encounter can be risky: in inter-religious work we repeatedly perceive this potential for destabilization and confrontation in an in-depth dialogue on often radical issues of one's own person and religious community. The point is crucial because such an encounter of my identity with the other is at risk of fundamentalism whenever the encounter with the other pushes for a "hard and pure" identity of me/us. In order to avoid this, it is a question of managing and dealing wisely with the double and complex synchronic process concerning the identity/other nexus described schematically by Bergoglio.

A third dimension consists in the work necessary to verify the sincerity of intentions, that is, to cleanse them of unclear or instrumental aims. It is a patient and reciprocal work on one's personal and community self in order to be progressively more authentic and reliable. It is an inner ecology that requires constant and multifaceted attention to one's own person and to one's interlocutor. Finally, this theme of intention shows how these three stages are not arranged in a straight line or on a chronological axis, but are placed in a circular perspective: they are always to be retraced in the knowledge that authentic identity is never conquered once and for all, that courage and readiness to meet the other must always make their way again among internal and external obstacles, that the sincerity of the intentions of the heart and of the community are always a fragile acquisition. To these highlighted dimensions we can add a final dimension that helps to build an interpretative horizon to the text of Abu Dhabi.

### 3.5 *Hermeneutics of Friendship*

What we have seen so far leads to a further step that enriches the interpretative horizon on the Abu Dhabi Declaration. In the speech he held in Naples, Pope Francis speaks of dialogue and proximity using the unique category of spiritual ethnography. Ethnography as a field research practice has long been associated

84 Cf. Benveniste, *L'ospitalità*, pp. 64–75.

with mission, or rather with a certain attentive, prolonged, and close way of being present in people's lives.<sup>85</sup>

The practice of observation and participatory insertion of action research could also be considered a part of this perspective, with all due distinctions concerning methods, paradigms and perspectives. Pope's statement shows a way of proceeding in exploring the texts and knowledge of people belonging to other religious traditions.<sup>86</sup> It is about following in the footsteps of Abraham – الخليل – the friend of God:<sup>87</sup>

The journey of Abraham was a blessing of peace. Yet it was not easy: he had to face struggles and unforeseen events. We too have a rough journey ahead, but like the great Patriarch, we need to take *concrete steps*, to set out and seek the face of others, to share memories, gazes and silences, stories and experiences.<sup>88</sup>

If carried out with seriousness and with an open and critical spirit, this research becomes an exposure to the face of the other which, instead of leading to a watering down, allows one to also deepen one's own believing tradition. In this effort of prolonged and attentive knowledge of texts and people, many questions are raised, conflicts and dysfunctions are unveiled, and rapprochements are discovered.

From this context, a peculiar and gratuitous human dimension sometimes emerges that can be described as friendship. Cultivating friendships at the boundary thus becomes not only a fundamental human experience, but an element of the hermeneutical horizon. The history of religious traditions is not infrequently marked by the theme of friendship, which sometimes becomes the very driving force of a deeper theological and spiritual understanding. In the stories of the Jewish tradition, one may think of the friendship between rabbi Meir and the 'other'/ אחר, the heretic Elisha ben Abuya.<sup>89</sup> In some passages, rabbi Meir's friendship challenges, as it were, God's goodness, and increases the possibilities of understanding the eschatological salvation of his friend turned heretic. One may also consider the presence of friendship in John's gospel, in which Jesus reveals himself and lays down his life for his friends' salvation.<sup>90</sup> Christian de Chergé's dramatic reflection may also come

85 Cf. Pandolfi, *L'interpretazione dell'altro* and Pandolfi, *Interculturalidad cooperativa*.

86 Cf. De Francesco, *Fedi e cittadinanza*, pp. 401–412.

87 Cf. *Isaiah* 41:8 and *Letter to James* 2:23.

88 Pope Francis, *Interreligious Meeting*.

89 Cf. Stroumsa, *Aher: A Gnostic*, pp. 228–238.

90 *John* 15:9–17.

to mind, where in several passages – shortly before his death – he tries to understand the “mystery of Islam” starting from his complete closeness – to the end – to many Muslim believers.<sup>91</sup> Friendship is understood here as the context in which theology – explicitly or implicitly – wishes to recognise a goodness in the friend’s religious path and, even in the conviction of one’s own belonging, seeks theological solutions to grasp the possibilities and journeys of goodness and salvation in the path of others.<sup>92</sup> Being close becomes a motivating force to look for resources in one’s own tradition and interpretative tools that allow to fulfil one of the functions of tradition, which is to authorise its own overcoming.<sup>93</sup> We have probably reached what Paul Ricoeur defines the insight of the possible truth of the other:

I would like to at least hint at how the reference to the one and multiple spirit can contribute, if not to resolving the antinomy [i.e. if I am convinced that my confession of faith is the repository of truth, then other confessions are false and can only be tolerated in the name of secularity], at least to assuming it and living it courageously and if possible joyfully for the sake of recognising of the other.<sup>94</sup>

He adds:

In terms of the spirit I cannot hope to be myself in the truth without hoping and believing that you, who do not believe what I believe, are also, in a way I do not know, in the truth. And this way I cannot know by virtue of the finite, limited character of all understanding. This other part of the truth I can only perceive, recognise laterally [...] therefore without being able to compare the belief of the other and my own from the outside, as seen from the star Sirius.<sup>95</sup>

There is no relativism in this approach:

relativism presupposes comparison, overlooking, and a certain perspective. It is rather from the depths of my conviction [...] that I notice laterally other convictions, beliefs and non-beliefs. For relativism there are no

91 Cf. Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine*.

92 Cf. Cornille, *Empathy*, pp. 102–117.

93 Cf. Neri, *Fuori di sé*.

94 Ricoeur, *Dello Spirito*, p. 51 (our translation).

95 Ricoeur, *Dello Spirito*, p. 51 et seq.



longer convictions, but opinions that are so different that they become indifferent. Therefore, *the worst way to meet the other is to cancel his intention of truth at the same time as mine*. All dialogue disappears where there is no more comparison of views, and no more conviction. I know that this paradox that has taken the place of antinomy is more difficult to consider [...]. The Spirit is one, but no one knows whence the wind blows.<sup>96</sup>

The sapiential attitude implies an *a posteriori* recognition of the existence of some divine action and presence – even with the contradictions and ambiguities of every tradition – which is based on proximity as a complex act of looking into each other's eyes in a relentless attempt at mutual understanding.<sup>97</sup> Proximity and friendship – understood as a *way of proceeding*<sup>98</sup> – constitute a further element of the horizon within which to read the text of the Declaration.

#### 4 An Assessment

In re-reading – in chapter 2 and 3 – the statement of the Abu Dhabi document, as a figure, we have presented some hermeneutical observations that have led us to assume, as a background, a sapiential perspective able to identify the theological horizon in which the observation of the document can be placed. It seemed to us that this horizon could be identified by five areas and perspectives – plus one – namely:

- a) the importance of an attentive consideration of the historical dimension that allows theology not to read reality only based on *a priori* arguments, but also adopting an *a posteriori* perspective;
- b) the relevance of the hermeneutic problem with respect to one's own tradition and sacred texts, which allows for reconsiderations and dialogical openings;
- c) the centrality of the posture of the hermeneutic community that carries out this interpretation and, in our case, the fruitful adoption of a sacramental perspective of understanding of the Church, a perspective that allows, at the same time, a deep faith in the singularity of Jesus the Messiah and an attitude of humility and listening;

<sup>96</sup> Ricoeur, *Dello Spirito*.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Roberts, *Discerning Doctrine*, pp. 124–142 and Bori, *Per un consenso etico*.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Ryliškyté, *Conversion*, pp. 370–393.

- d) the relevance of a deontology of interreligious dialogue with careful work on the personal and community intentions of all those involved in the dialogue;
- e) proximity and friendship as essential interpretative ways to talk to each other at the boundary, and as tools for a theologically more penetrating understanding of the questions posed by the existence of the other.
- f) the possibilities that such hermeneutic horizons open up: the opportunity of recognising the legitimacy – theologically mysterious – of other religious traditions and an encouragement to investigate – theologically and ethically – the violent dimensions not only of interpretative traditions but also of sacred texts.

This sapiential perspective and our way of reading the text can be sustained by a re-reading of Second Vatican Council itself<sup>99</sup> and its reception<sup>100</sup> in such a way as to be able to consider – through careful and ever new discernments – the other religious paths as paths of possible salvation and revelation in some way connected<sup>101</sup> with the path of Jesus the Messiah understood as the full manifestation of the mystery of God's excessive love.<sup>102</sup> This set of elements creates an interpretive horizon put in a framework of a dialogical openness, Christologically and Pneumatologically inspired.<sup>103</sup> This horizon enables, on the one hand, to appreciate the richness of a dialogue that allows one to get to know the other and, with this movement, to deepen one's own faith.<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, this perspective helps to recognise *a posteriori* in other religious traditions – paths, biographies, institutions, texts and experiences – that the wisdom of God, in his inexhaustible will to reach every man and woman,<sup>105</sup> may have inspired and sustained – in the interaction between his delicate action and the cultures, languages and human contexts – these traditions. As we know, Simmacus, replying to Ambrose, said that God is too great a mystery

99 Cf. O'Collins, *Vatican II on 'Other' Ways of Salvation*, pp. 152–170.

100 Cf. Clooney, *Interreligious Learning*, pp. 269–283.

101 Coda, *Il Logos e il nulla*, p. 109: "If it is true, therefore, from the point of view of Christian theology, that all religions, in order to understand themselves, are called to recognize the particular identity of the Christian religion as the historical and sacramental mediation of the event that Christ is, on the other hand it is equally true that the Christian religion cannot open itself up to the universal fullness of the crucified and risen Christ if it does not recognize his presence/action through the Spirit – and in their own difference – also in the other religions" (our translation).

102 Cf. Przywara, *Che 'cosa' è Dio?*

103 Cf. Coda, *Il Logos e il nulla*, p. 66 et seq.

104 Cf. De Francesco, *The new challenges*, pp. 219–233.

105 Cf. Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*. For a recent assesment of the Dupuis case see Tanzarella, *Dalla frontiera del pluralismo teologico*, pp. 118–129.

to be sought by only one way; a Christian theology of religions should, for its part, affirm: God is too great a mystery to seek his creatures by only one way.

### Bio

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