

# UNITY AND PEACE: Mutual Understanding between Religions as Utopia

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"Ah! What a great fortune it would be if... we could all - every man on earth - be under one religion and belief, so that there would be no more rancour or ill-will among men who hate each other because of diversity and contrariness of beliefs and of sects! And just as there is only one God, Father, Creator, and Lord of everything that exists, so all peoples could unite and become one people, and that people be on the path of salvation, under one faith and one religion, giving glory and praise to our Lord God.

Think gentlemen, of the harm that comes from men not belonging to a single Religion..."

The ideas of a dreamer, the opinion of a fool, who formulated them around 1270 in a book called *The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*. He was the Catalan poet, philosopher and theologian, Raymond Lull. Contemporary and subsequent writers thought about him in the less than glorious titles mentioned above. "A Utopist, an adventurer, a pilgrim between two cultures, who dreamt of leading to union the different peoples of the world through recognition of the one single God... A poet of the impossible, whose life history fades in legend." He is said to have died in 1316 as an 83 year old man while he was crossing over to Mallorca, his native city after a missionary journey in Tunisia where the Moslems had stoned him and drove him away. Within the Franciscan Order, Raymond, who remained a layman throughout his life, is venerated as a saint.

"O God, you are almighty and invisible to those whom you want you can show yourself as you would like to be conceived. Be merciful and show your face to all nations so that they will be saved and redeemed. If in your generosity you are willing to do so, then the sword, envy and hate and all evil would give way. All would acknowledge that there is only one religion in the multiplicity of practices and customs. To be sure, one cannot do away with all this diversity of practices and customs but in the same way that you are only one God there should at least be only a single religion and one single cult for God's worship."

This solemn petition is spoken in heaven by none other than an archangel: he brings this prayer before God's throne to express the laments of those who suffer under religious wars. On earth it is 1453, the year when Constantinople was captured by the Turkish Sultan. Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, Church politician, Coran scholar, ecumenist *avant la lettre*, influential theologian in the efforts for reunion at the Councils of Basel and Florence, makes the Utopia of peace and faith the subject of a work with this name. It is the optimistic vision of a pragmatic who believes in the power of dialogue and in the real Utopia. He seeks to find a common understanding in what constitutes the essence without illuding himself that the eternal peace between religions which is being made in heaven shall in fact be realized in Jerusalem, the common centre for all.

"Now go. My advice is that you take the matter fully as it comes. Everyone of you got his ring from his father: let everyone confidently believe his ring is the the genuine one. It is possible that the father could no longer suffer the tyranny of *one single* ring in his house.

And it is certain that he loved all three of you and loved you equally. In that he did not want to oppress two of you to favour a third. Come on!

Let each one of you emulate his pure indiscriminatory love. Let each one of you strive in competition to bring to light the power of the stone in his ring.

Let this power come to help  
with gentleness, with heartfelt, tolerant disposition,  
with kindness and inner submissiveness of God."

This is the Parable of the Rings in *Nathan der Weise*, by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. He was the son of a pastor, a critical, enlightened lover of theology, a dramatist and learned librarian at Wolfenbüttel. For him an understanding and thus even peace between the three revealed religions is only possible if each religion renounces its claim to absolutism. Beyond all the current doctrinal differences, all religions are confronted in daily life with the same task: to safeguard in practice trust in God and love of neighbour. Within their specific individuality religions are possibilities used by God to educate men to the true humanity. The Utopia of tolerance directed by reason takes religions at their word: it appeals to their power on favour for peace and specifically against the brutalities that have often been committed in God's name or under that of religion.

Three personalities, three epochs but clearly the same Utopia of an

understanding between the religions, namely Jewish, Christian and Moslem, even if argued from different philosophical and theological standpoints. Three literary witnesses who can be shown to be related together in a chronological order. This is an Utopia of unity and peace formulated in terms with different objectives. Its content, however, due to the conflicts and opposition of the three above mentioned religions, has been refuted 1000 times up to the present day.

It is not my task to describe this dystopia of violence and domination, about fear and destruction. We all know it even if we would like very much to forget it. Moreover, the lives and works of the three above-mentioned authors have been thoroughly examined into the minutes details by specialists in the history of philosophy, theology and literature. In this regard I would be contributing nothing new in this lecture.

But I am fascinated by the fact that in European cultural history, in Western thought, in spite of all conflicts the Utopia of the understanding between these three religions existed and was formulated. This Utopia is in its historical witness very much like a dangerous reminder which should not leave fundamental theologians in peace in view of the way Christian Theology sees itself and in connection with an appropriate evaluation of the possible service towards salvation offered by the other religions. This memory should be brought into the future understanding of Christian Theology. It would have to be a Theology:

- that can still be honestly justified even after Auschwitz, the war against Iraq and in the ex-Yugoslavia; that lives from the utopian power which is present in suffering that is not suppressed but shared in solidarity; but above all in grief for the loss of peace for which we too are to blame;

- that dares call back to memory the forgotten hopes of those who historically were defeated, and persists in narrating how things could be differently;

- that endures the tension between universality of the claims of reason and the acceptance of others in their distinctiveness and let it become fruitful in justice, peace and the preservation of the environment.

Let us see, in view of these challenges to Theology today, what we can learn from the witnesses of the past.

**1.1** *"... Until we can agree how best we can honour and serve each other, so that we can arrive at a mutual understanding".*

Utopia; no place; nowhere, that which we do not already know and that which stands before us as a task and duty still to be carried out; a dream and a tool for action at the same time; planned change on the one hand, and hope that reaches into the unprecedented on the other; a journey into the unknown, negation of what is at hand and positive projection of what has already been sighted; an end followed persistently with the reservation that to err is human and that only God can bring to perfection our fumbling human attempts.

These connotations that for me arise in the concept of Utopia characterize at the same time the agitated biography of Raymond Lull. In her book *La parole risquée de Raymond Lulle. Entre le judaïsme, le christianisme et l'Islam* published in 1993, Dominique de Courcelles calls Lull "le penseur de l'étrangeté," the thinker of "being-a-foreigner", for whom the truth can come to light only in the exchanges of dialogue, in the meeting of the different view-points. Lull seeks that which divides, the interval, in which the other has the possibility to be and to breath.

In 1232 when Raymond Lull was born in Mallorca, that island had barely four years been conquered by the army of James I, King of Aragon and Castille from Moslem power. A third of the population however remained Moslem and spoke Arabic. Communication with North Africa through sea and commerce were intensely fostered. The smaller group of Jews had an important role through its influence in commercial life. So Lull grew up in an environment where the Iberian peninsula had the three revealed, monotheistic religions living together in a tense relationship.

Raymond had the office of senescalcus mensae, the budget controller at the court of the later King James I of Mallorca. Later, in a sort of autobiography that as an octogenarian he dictated to his friends, he reports the event of 1263 that gave his life a new direction. He says that the Crucified Christ appeared to him five times. He leaves his wife and children to dedicate himself entirely to missionary activity. He considers as his divine mandate the foundation of schools where future missionaries were to be trained in languages and in writing of a book in which he describes a system of thinking and an effective method for the conversion of the infidels to the Christian faith. Over the decades Raymond develops his *Ars Magna*. This is his book about the great art of discovering the truth that is based on a few principles, common to the three religions, and that have as their central point is the access to God through reflection on his name and attributes. On these foundations Lull then tries to lead his partner in the conversation to the mysteries peculiar to Christianity: the Trinity and the Incarnation.

The saintly Dominican scholar, Raymond of Pennafort, the third Master General of the Order, and a respected canonist, gave him the advice to study not in Paris, the centre of scholastic theology, but in Mallorca, at the periphery, in close contact with Arabs and Jews. So he learnt Arabic and a little Latin. He did not become a Scholastic as so many others, but an original thinker whose literary compositions give prominent importance to the language of the people, the Catalan dialect.

Raymond Lull lived in Mallorca - where he founded a first missionary convent - and in Montpellier. From here he embarked on intensive preaching and travelling. Most of all he wanted to convince the Papal Curia about the necessity of Missionary convents and language teaching for prospective missionaries; but without much success. In Paris, where he went to present his *Ars*, his teaching method, he found no understanding.

After a severe physical and spiritual crisis, he travelled in 1293 for the first time to Tunis. There he engaged himself in missionary dialogue with the Moslems. The result: a peremptory expulsion order. Once again Raymond tried his luck in the scholarly milieu of Paris. There he was met with ridicule; demoralised he travelled further. In his mystical writings, *The Tree of Philosophy of Love* Lull wrote the following, no doubt thinking of his own personal experiences:

“The friend travels to far-away countries, and tells the people to understand and love the immense goodness of his Beloved. But the people do not listen. They make fun of him and reproach him for what he does out of love. His heart sighs, he cries, because the friend can only do that which is dictated by Love.”

Raymond wrote numerous books, wherein he unfolded in conversations with Islam and Judaism the central tenets of Christianity. Here he is very careful to put reason in the forefront as the unifying factor. His position is the following: *Faith can be true or mistaken. Reason on the contrary is always true.* In other words it is not enough to believe to be sure that you possess the truth. In religious conversations the truth should be capable of being confirmed by reason. In the same line of thought Lull repeats: *The infidels do not care about the affirmations of the believers but exclusively about the grounds they bring from reason.* They say: *We do not want to change one faith for another but we would be willing to exchange belief with understanding.*

Such statements put Raymond Lull on a different plane from that of the apologetical efforts of the Dominican missionaries of his time. A case in point would be that Raymond Martí, who wrote in 1278 *Pugio fidei contra Judeos* wherein he demonstrated his knowledge of the Hebrew language, the Torah, the Mishnah and the Talmud. This method was able to bring about surprise effects on one hand but it provoked endless discussions over the texts. Lull prefers to encounter his partner with rational arguments and explain the tenets of faith with convincing arguments from reason. This is the continuation of the *fides qarens intellectum* of St. Anselm of Canterbury. Faith and Reason do not exclude each other; in its reciprocal intertwining faith gives the decisive impulse to thought; but thinking leads the man searching for God back to faith.

Perhaps with a reference to a position of Martí, Lull often relates the story of a missionary who was able to convince the King of Tunis of the errors of Islam. But he did not succeed to convert the Sultan to the Christian faith. The Sultan asked the missionary to prove the truth of the Christian faith. The missionary replied that the Christian faith could not be proved. "Here you have the Credo in Arabic: Believe that." The Sultan answered to that saying "I am not ready to give up my faith for another (*credere pro credere*) but I would be ready to give up my faith for understanding" (*Credere pro intelligere*). Then the Sultan reproaches the missionary that he made a mistake. "*You have scorned the law that I had and then you are not able to bring conclusive proofs for your own. From now on I will remain without a law (that is you have taken away my faith and left me spiritually homeless).*" Then he expelled the missionary and his companions in disgrace from his kingdom.

The power of rational arguments with which Lull wanted to encounter the others and to go beyond the limits of the strict ecclesiastical and theological confines was demonstrated not only in books, religious discussions and novels. Lull's passion for truth instigated him to prove in practice what he had envisaged in theory. In 1307 at 75 years he set out for a second journey to North Africa. This time he was even stoned, condemned to prison, driven by his beard through the streets and locked up in the prison latrine. After his release and a shipwreck he arrived back in Montpellier. The Indian summer of his restless life ensues: a certain success in his two year teaching activity in Paris (1309 - 1311). During this time his confrontation with Averroism took place and the Council of Vienna, in which Lull took part. Here it was decided that teaching posts for Hebrew, Arabic and Syriac were to be erected in Paris, Oxford, Bologna and Salamanca. That fulfilled one of Lull's old wishes. But the fact that Lull also succeeded to have the property of the suppressed

order of Knights Templars transferred to the order of St. John in view of a prospective military intervention in the Holy Land certainly belongs to those incomprehensible contradictions of a life which wished to dedicate itself to peaceful dialogue. In 1314 he leaves for Tunis for a third time provided with the King's commendatory letters, hoping to convert the Sultan. As has already been said, only legend reports the circumstances of his death. Lull may have understood the following spiritual metaphor as a premonition of his own death.

Love is a storm driven sea without shores or harbours. The Friend drowns in the sea, along with his suffering. But his consumption rises up from the depths."

Now let us turn to his book *The Book of the Gentile and The Three Wise Man*. It is the first book that Lull wrote after his conversion and in it one sees the foundations of his later literary activity. Lull is interested in bringing about the opening out to the other in dialogue.

Four factors play a role in this process:

1. Lull does not base himself on arguments that are taken from texts or any authority. He prefers statements on which the three religions are in agreement. These are certain attributes of the one God, a world vision taken over from Greek philosophy, and the corresponding categories of understanding.

2. Lull does not attack the religion of the other partner. He seeks to present the truth of his standpoint positively and without emotional surcharge.

3. Moreover it is not Lull's concern to defend the truth of the Catholic religion against possible attacks. The best proof of its truth is to be conveyed through the inner consistency of the Christian faith, especially the teaching about the Trinity and the Incarnation.

4. As Lull was conscious of the global religious situation of his times he concentrated primarily on the political military and spiritually strongest rival, i.e., Islam. In contrast to his contemporaries Lull does not show any sentiments of hate or suspicion vis-à-vis the Jews, who were then an oppressed minority.

Through these four aspects of the fundamental dialogical attitude Lull creates the conditions for the ideal communication in religious discussion. The participants have equal rights to expose their points of view, without constraint, freely and without fear of sanctions if they deviate from the official standpoints. It is in this way that the book *The Book of the Gentile and Three Wise Men* is composed.

**1.2** Three learned men - a Christian, a Jew and a Moslem meet at the gates of a city to find a quiet place where they can discuss theological matters. One may say: they meet in Utopia, in a place outside, in an imaginary world, the opposite of that world, the opposite of that world where prison, persecution and poverty reign. A Gentile joins their company. *"He was a learned philosopher. Already old he was reflecting on death and on the happiness of this world. This pagan did not know anything about God and did not believe in the resurrection. He thought that everything ends with death."* His inability to answer these final questions filled him with great sadness. This set him on the way to seek the non-place where he could find an answer. Lull depicts this place as a wonderful forest. *"As the Gentile arrived in the big forest he saw fountains, rivulets and meadows. Many different birds were singing on the trees. There were deer, stags, gazelles, hares, rabbits and other animals that delighted the eye. The trees were in full blossom or laden with fruit. They were of many different types and full of fragrance."*

The beauty of the forest, however, increases the sadness of the Gentile, because he finds no answer. He wanders from place to place like a lost soul until he comes to a very wonderful path. He decides *'to follow it till the end of his misery.'* Here he will meet the three wise men, who peacefully are talking to one another. Each talked about this faith and about the science he taught to his students. Walking together refreshed their spirits, tired from study. They arrived at a lovely meadow, where a spring watered olive trees. There they meet a lady - Intelligence. She personifies that which has the power to unite the wise men together in spite of their religious differences. Their dependence on Divine Revelation which enlightens man on the attributes of God on true virtuous behaviour and on his calling to happiness, this recognition which unites all religions, has the power to set the world in motion towards a real Utopia. It unites mankind under the one true law of God, gives their actions the quality of justice, gives comfort to the oppressed and help to the suffering. In this way the three Wise Men could greet the Gentile wandering astray in the forest with the same words, that is with the same common faith: "May the God of Glory, the Father and the Lord of all there is, the Creator of the World who will raise up from the dead the good and the evil, protect you and set you free from your suffering." In the conversation that follows the Wise Men explain to the Gentile their common faith that God is good, great, eternal, almighty, wise, perfect and loving. They speak to him about the resurrection. Finally the Gentile is free from his anxieties and praises God. He asks the Wise Men to win over his fellow countrymen to the faith, to their God. But now it turns out that the Wise Men do not agree in matters that relate to questions of faith and morals. "Who had the best



law?" asks the Gentile and asks them to explain to him their ways-of-faith. They agree to explain their viewpoint, one after the other, each without any interruption from the others. The Gentile should then himself decide which of the three religions is the true one.

The Jew begins. He has the oldest Law. After a prayer and continually recalling the history of deprivation, suffering and persecutions that his people were exposed to, the Jew sets out eight articles of the Jewish faith: the Unity of God, the Creation, the Commandments given to Moses, the freedom that will come when the Messiah arrives, the Resurrection, the Last Judgement, Heaven and Hell. The Christian follows, says a prayer and set out his confession of faith: he puts the emphasis on the Trinitarian God, the Creator and the Redeemer who brings the world to perfection as well as on the humanity of Christ. On these two points the Christian position on God's Pefection surpasses that of the Jews and Moslems. This is the main thrust of the Christian exposè. It is the Moslem's turn. After a prayer and ritual washing he sets out to talk about the Unity of God and about Mohammed, the Prophet. For him the Coran is the most beautiful book that exists or could exist. It is the Word of God, dictated by God himself to the Prophet, a simple, uneducated layman. In an extremely concrete way the Moslem describes the pleasures of heaven.

Once again the Gentile thanks the God of Love, whose goodness, might and wisdom he has come to know. He is thankful for Faith, which has driven away the darkness of his thoughts, for Hope that has become his friend, and for the richness of Love, which he can now give to his neighbour. His new knowledge shows its power in the new way in which he behaves towards his fellow men. He wants to become a missionary himself, leave everything behind him, suffer deprivations, wander from one country to another to make known God's Perfection. There is fixed abode in the vision of the utopian world: the reciprocal understanding between religions is a hard way through a world that has not yet become an Oikumene, a common house for all. In Lull's vision all those who set themselves to work for faith in one God and the ethical responsibility for the just world shall meet with hunger, thirst, heat, cold, poverty, fatigue, loss of country and break-up of relationships.

It is now surprising that Lull does not betray which religion the Gentile has chosen as his way to truth. The Wise Men do not want to know his choice, "so that each one of them could believe that the Gentile has chosen his religion. And most of all because this is now a theme for disputation between us, so that using our Reason and our sound Common Sense, we shall seek to find out which religion you

shall prefer. For if you were to tell us which religion you have preferred, we would have neither such a good theme for discussion nor such a good inducement to inquiring after the truth." The quest for the truth is then to go on, none of them is to claim for himself the whole truth. The common faith in one God should be a motive for them to love and help each other, to stop all warfare, and stop killing each other in the name of religion. The Wise Men leave their Non-Place and return to the city. They bid each other farewell in a cordial and friendly manner. "Each asked forgiveness in case he had said something offensive to the other's religion. All of them forgave one another. They now want to meet daily and continue their conversation till "all three of us confess one faith and one religion, till we agree about this and reach a single understanding. Because it is war, hardship, jealousy, injustice and dishonour that hinder men from uniting in one single faith." After that they would go all over the world to praise and glorify the Name of God, our Lord. Lull concludes: "The three Wise Men went back home and kept their word regarding that which they had promised."

**1.3** The utopian picture of a peaceful co-existence and of striving together for a consensus presuppose the fact that no one of the dialogue partners is restrained from expressing his opinions. Dialogue is founded on listening reciprocally, it accepts the difference in the other, and the expression of his opinions. Through this a space for ethical behaviour is created; that is, to be sure, not identical with the will to put all views on the same plane. Total coincidence excludes propinquity to the other. Hence it makes sense that the choice of the Pagan remains unknown and the questioning remains open.

In this way, does not the Gentile become, by means of his questioning and listening the teacher of the three Wise Men? In the open ended dialogue, the truth does not force itself, still less is the other constrained with force: it remains an appeal to the free man's responsibility, to his spiritual alertness and to his never-ending questioning. Not by coincidence did Lull write at the end of his book that he had written it to "*enlighten saddened souls and to wake up the sleeping eminent.*" Truth is enlightenment and challenge, light and judgment, all at once. In the multiplicity of its way of expression it contradicts the totalitarian claims of a way of articulation and interpretation which considers itself the only one possible. In Lull's opinion religion would become ideology, wherever, in its name, the study of Logic and Science is forbidden or where the multiplicity of opinions is suppressed. Moreover religion should not be misused for the establishment of power structures or for the justification of violence and intolerance.

The Utopia of mutual understanding does not leave space for a victory of the opinion of one over the ideas of another. At the end of the way that the three Wise Men want to follow together there is no victory for knowledge but the reciprocal responsibility and the will to bring together harmoniously the knowledge of God and the commitment in favour of justice and goodness - against the usual behaviour pattern of persecution, oppression and religious terror. The Utopia which Raymond Lull continuously redrafts while wandering between the worlds in the opposite of the world of certainties in which Theologians, Inquisitors, Popes and Kings sought for their own purposes to instrumentalise the truths of the religions. For Lull Utopia is the place for perceiving that which is different and that who is different - a place that is usually given no space in the systems of those who think that they possess the divine richness of God's attributes simply by the force of their theological definition. Contrary to all this, Lull emphasises the free play of God's Love and Goodness which permeates the created world and God's Incarnation. Hence man's answer to God's might is a free response in the form of Justice and Love of Neighbour. For Lull, the bond between knowledge of God and Ethics opened the way for dialogue between the religions; this led him also to enter into the depth of Religion: the loving perception of the other, who is the image of the beloved God.

"Speak, fool: What is Love?

He answered: Love

is harmony between knowledge and action  
in the direction of an end  
towards which the Friends' will strives  
who would like to move to honour  
and serve his Beloved."

The Friend designed and built a beautiful city  
where his Beloved was to live.

He built it with Love and Remembrance  
tears, laments and pains of ardent yearning,  
he decorated it with joys  
Devotion, Hope and gave it as protection  
Faith, Justice, Wisdom, courage  
and due proportion."

## 2 "... *That it is possible to construct eternal peace in religion*"

**2.1** Recent sketches of Fundamental Theology recall that while the message of the Gospel does not contain a social-political programme, in the way of a Utopia it operates as social-political criticism. Utopias have therefore a prophetic role: they interpret reality in the light of hope of a better future and protest against the attitude that regards what has historically been achieved as final. In this sense the ecumenical programme of Nicholas of Cusa had a thoroughly prophetic power of an Utopia. His dialogue *De Pace Fidei*, Peace in Faith, to which I am restricting myself, is written on the same lines as those previously indicated by Lull. Already as a young student of Canon Law in Padua Nicholas had acquainted himself with the writings of Raymond Lull. Later as a cardinal he possessed a respectable number of Lull's handwritten works as well as numerous handwritten notes he had copied himself. The relationship between the two does not restrict itself to comparative religion - that interests us here - but extends itself to the theory of knowledge, theology, cosmology, christology and anthropology.

A lot distinguishes Nicholas as Cusa, the philosopher and church prince from Raymond Lull, the "vir phantasticus" of the 13th century; his geographical and social origins, the horizon of time and historical circumstances, life history and character. One fundamental thing, however, joins them together - and it changes the life history of each: their unremitting dedication and quest to find the truth to which corresponds the striving for unity in the sense of bringing together those who were separated from and in opposition to each other.

Nicholas presented his religious dialogue as a vision: a conversation that takes place in the "heavenly Council" which the author was permitted to observe deeply impressed by news of the horrors that were recently committed by the Turkish King in Constantinople.

As in Lull, religious wars, oppression, rivalry and the quest for material goods are designated at the very beginning as the grounds that keep mankind from seeking the hidden God. God had sent the prophets, who had set up cults and laws. But the long-practised customs were taken for the truth itself and then defended as such against others. An archangel asks God to make a revelation that what is being sought using this diversity of means is only the *one* divine truth and goodness. In order to make perpetual peace replace war between religions, he should show that there is only one religion under the multiplicity of rites. The difference should no

longer be a motive for war but serve to increase piety. At first God dismisses this prayer and reminds the Archangel that he had given men a free will so that they would live peacefully with each other and freely arrive at the truth. He had undertaken everything possible to help men in their orientation for the quest of truth. He had been so obliging towards them that the divine Word, the Divine Truth himself became man so that "nobody would doubt that man in his human nature could find the immortal nourishment of truth in the Incarnated Word according to the choice of his own free will."

Now the Incarnated Word begins to speak in the heavenly discussion, and in favour of mankind. He points out that the unstable relationships, the multiplicity of languages and interpretations make it difficult for men to find truth. The diversity in religions is thus to be examined in deliberation. The intention is to unify peacefully the diversity of religions into a single, sacrosanct religion through the common consensus of all men (*communi omnium hominum consensu*).

But this does not in any way mean that men should be forced to change their religion of origin with another! The "una religio" consists of that which each religion assumes in its essence. The philosophical assumption of the Cusanic argument is: unity has priority over multiplicity - the fundamental wisdom that is known in all religions and that is identical with the one God, the origin of everything.

Paul directs the next part of the discussion on religions. The theme is now the significance of the diversity of religious customs and rites: they are sensible and changing signs of the unchanging truth of faith. They should not be understood as deeds by which we attain justification. For it is only on the ground of faith, in which love operates, that all Abraham's posterity receives God's promised gifts.

This is followed by short sections on the Sacraments (especially Baptism and the Eucharist). The conclusion is: "... that the diversity in religions is to be found in the rites rather than in the adoration of the one God, who is assumed from the very beginning and who is revered in all religions. In a certain sense the whole exterior area of religion is relativised, which can be seen in an astonishing remark on circumcision. In the service of peace in faith, even something like a barter could take place: if other peoples would accept the faith of the Christians, the latter could take over certain non-Christian forms of religious practice. Nicholas gives an example the practice of circumcision! This generosity in tolerating different rites is counterbalanced by a strict adhering to the truth expressed in Christianity.

The dialogue with Greek, Roman and Arab philosophy concentrates at first on faith in one God. Later Indian religion came as the subject of the conversation and it is argued that the cult of so many gods presupposes the prior existence of one God. Hence even pictures of pagan gods can be tolerated in so far as they do not lead away from the cult and adoration of the one single God.

In the following chapters Christology is taken up under the chairmanship of St Peter. Christology arouses the greatest contravenes in the world. Hence Nicholas tries in chapters 11 and 12 of *De Pace Fidei* to open up a broad spectrum for understanding among his non-Christian partners regarding the reasoning behind the hypostatic union, the divine and human union in a single person". He seems to have especially the Muslim audience before his eyes because he connects certain expressions in the Koran regarding Christ that had been abridged in the Nestorian way in the line of the Dogma of Chalcedon. The hypostatic union is explicitly seen as a presupposition for the true relief in Christ as Redeemer and Saviour of all. "It is Christ who is presupposed by those who hope to arrive at eternal happiness." The Christological principle - the union of man and God realized in this concrete individual - is for Nicholas the fundamental essence of true religion and men's yearning for communion with God. Understood in this way the christological moment is not only presupposed in all religions; but also one person of the Word who became man is fulfilled, that is the string of all men towards eternal happiness.

**2.2** The Utopia to set up peace through religion presents in Nicholas of Cusa a normative understanding of religion. Each religion pretends to be the way to God and each one should keep up this claim in practice. The central tenets of our religion - the monotheistic/trinitarian concept of God, the Christological dogma, the justification of men before God through faith - could only be maintained through the harmonious co-existence with other religions - *concordantia religionum*. This will reach perfection in a place like heaven where common sense hold sway - *in coelo rationis*. As the author himself confesses, he sees this Utopia "as when he is in a special spiritual/intellectual rapture" (*raptus ... ad quantam intellectualem altitudinem*). This intellectual vision makes it possible to find unity behind multiplicity, to set up a *facilis concordantia* among religions, which is a postulate for a long term peace. Concordance as an utopical concept comprehends here, as in the other theological and ecclesiological works of the Cardinal, "the combined efforts of all parts of a harmonious whole, the unity of different elements without any part standing in opposition to the others."

This intellectual Utopia presumes that man is capable to recognise the truth in others. This does not stop back Nicholas from adhering to the Christian revelation. It gave him also the possibility to see this truth as the reasonable basis for an understanding between religions. In the Christian religion this claim could be realized because at its centre lies the incarnated Son of God, the Mediator Jesus Christ. It's a different story from the other prophets because in his person he founded "a universal, unlimited community of believers in God." This religion lives through its christological centre, which in the multiplicity of religions seeks to be its profound truth and perfection. The utopic programme of Nicholas of Cusa does not in any way mean that he puts the contents of Christianity in question, through the multiplicity of other religious forms of expression. The Cardinal tries to assess other religions - particularly Judaism and Islam - from the Christian point of view. In this sense he tends to favour a theology of religions that qualifies other religions according to their scale of connections with the Christian truth.

How and who is to realize this "una religio"? The representatives of the three religions set a rendezvous in Jerusalem. Is this the earthly Jerusalem where historically the three met and struggled with each other, or is this the heavenly Jerusalem that is the final destination ardently desired by religious men? It can be both. Nicholas's ideal could mean a real Utopia or a regulative one, that could give wings to the idea of a peaceful meeting of religions right now, that could now be realized in a part but strives to its perfection later on. Peace in Faith could be also both the end and the way. It is in no way a matter of a "syncretism indifferent to the truth"; neither is it a "dialectic that falsely isolated recognized antitheses to build up a sort of lofty higher truths." It is rather the expectation that through dialogue and without physical or psychological constraints, the truth will enlighten men so that they, in spite of their cultures and religions, would arrive to a reasonable consensus. At the back of this project lies the theoretical reflection that unity is the ground behind the multiplicity of empirical manifestations, that this unity can only be expressed through multiplicity, differences and even contradictions. The intellect could see through these differences and contradictions and trace them back to an understandably unknown point of origin. As the many are contained in the one, so the many have the one as their reason. The real Utopia of Cusanus is the dream of unity in multiplicity and the legitimate multiple manifestations of the One. It is the dream that all men endowed with common sense in their search for truth and wisdom would strike for this One, God, who is the spring of life and love, the destination of our deepest desires.

**2.3** The strong intellectual impact of argumentation in the foregoing two authors does not stop them from “defending the unlimited truth and the universal validity of a single religion *vis-à-vis* concurrent and diverging world views.” Moreover religions have only a part of the truth that is in the true religion; in other words they stand ordained towards it. This method of thinking however cannot be easily combined with the pressing situation of the Islamic progress and the cultural crisis that would have brought to Christianity. The Utopia of Unity and Peace was almost a counter picture that hard-pressed Christianity resorted to, in order to assert the universality of understanding Christian truth and religion in the ideological and political confrontation of that time.

Perhaps, for today’s sensibilities there are exactly the limits of the process set out by Lull and Nicholas of Cusa. The attempt to present the essence of one’s faith in otherness brings up an unconditional acceptance of the other. It is easy to form an impression of isolation; moreover this way of reflecting tends to assess the other by way of external and unimportant criteria while interpreting one’s own standpoint as the real substance.

One should also point out as positive the fact that both authors understood comparative religion in dialogue form. “Even if in their case this was overwhelmingly fictitious and imaginary, still it presents the expectation of a real meeting. It is carried on by the consciousness that through the dynamics of conversation more can be achieved than making up a list of counter prejudices.” That dialogue that at that time was fictitious is now possibly and could be held in a true conversation. Hence the Other is not just tolerated because we see that in him we can discover a part of our truth. His Otherness is an enrichment to our own but it should be affirmed and promoted for its own sake.

### 3. *“Let each of you strive to bring to light the power of the stone in your ring!”*

In the opinion of many it is risky to talk about direct influence of Nicholas of Cusa on Lessing’s parable of the rings. One would easily have the impression that the church Prince was the forerunner of the famous man of the Enlightenment, perhaps even seen as the harbinger of the modern idea of religious tolerance. It’s certain that ideas of tolerance played a part in Nicholas of Cusa, when the matter turned on formulating an Utopia on religious peace in general. But in no case would the citizen of Cusa sell off this tolerance through relativising the contents of the



great revealed religions or depreciating the dogmatic contents of Christianity. The *una religio* is not the enlightened religion of reason. In fact even the aspired unity of faith did not require the same forms of religious expressions and signs. Here was the case where multiplicity was tolerated. "The solution for the different confessions of faith is not tolerance but concordance." In fact Nicholas starts from the position that the only instrument for mutual understanding between members of different religions was "reason, that responds in every conversation partner." Even if the question regarding truth in religion in Cusanus and Lessing could be answered differently, there is no doubt that the subject of searching truth through reason interested both of them.

"Only one from these three religions could be the true one." In the course of the parable of the rings Saladin's initial question is demonstrated to be theoretically insoluble. "... One could not prove which was the right as we could hardly prove which is the right faith." One could not possess truth as one possesses money in one's pocket, "... as if truth were a coin! Yes, if only it were very old coins that could be weighed. If only they were new coins, that leave an imprint, that one could count on a board! As one stacks money in a bag, does one stock truth in the head?"

In spite of the above Lessing was of the opinion that truth, once freed from prejudices, should promote love in tolerance and benevolence. It would be a mistake if one suspects here forms of easygoing pragmatism or indifference. Neither is it a refusal to take up questions about truth. In the famous controversy with the Pastor J.M. Goeze from Hamburg, Lessing writes:

"It's not the truth that a person possesses or thinks he possesses that constitutes the value of a person, but the honest effort that this person makes to acquire this truth. It's in the search for the truth and not in its possession that a person shows his capabilities. This constitutes his evergrowing perfection. On the other hand possession makes one calm, lazy, proud.

If God were to keep closed in his right hand all the truth and in his left hand the inspiring drive to seek the truth, (even with the clause that I will be continually making mistakes) and tells me: "Choose", I would fall humbly on his left hand and say: Father give me this for the pure truth is yours alone!"

It's well known that Lessing had always emphasised that on the basis of historical analysis alone, the truth of a single religion cannot be proved. In this context the three religions bring up the same problem: "Aren't they all founded in history, in written or traditional forms? And history is certainly built on the supposition of truth and faith. And whose truth and faith does one doubt the least? No doubt, one's own."

The true religion - the authentic ring - needs the proof and the power of the spirit: it must prove itself through its capacity to "make persons pleasant in the face of God and men."

The present religious systems stand in a relationship of concurrence to each other. "Religion is a Political Party". But this situation in Lessing's opinion should be superseded by a religion of humanism. Or perhaps it would be more correct to use a metaphor from the intrigues of the theatrical play: they should find out that they belong to the same family. The real worthiness of religion should be shown in the practical demonstration of humaneness. "Is a Christian a Christian, or a Jew a Jew or both human beings? If only I would have found in you that which constitutes the honour of man!" The multiplicity of \* is for religion only external bark. Once Saladin said to the temple master. "Will you remain with me, near me as a Christian or as a Muslim. It's the same. Whether with a white cloak, or with \*, a turban or a felt hat, as you like best. Just the same. I have never demanded that the same bark grows on all trees."

Lessing's Utopia regarding mutual understanding between religions is not so much founded on the rational search for truth that is never complete but which can lead to an agreement on the fundamental dogmatic contents but on humane practice, that is love without prejudices. "Don't you understand how easier it is to go in pious raptures than to act in a correct manner?" asks Nathan at the beginning of the play. It's exactly in deeds that are undertaken without calculations in favour of one's neighbour that religiosity is implicitly shown. Such cases were: the Temple master who saved a Jewish girl from death, Nathan who saved his family from murder through the Christians and then adopts a Christian girl as his daughter, and Saladin who shows mercy to the captured Templar. An act of charity consciously done can only come through concrete submissiveness to God. In this way man acts freely and still in accordance to God's will. "Nobody should be constrained". Nathan expresses this excellently as follows:

"Reason came back again and spoke in a soft voice  
 It's God. This is God's advice. Come over!  
 What you have long time understood  
 will not be all that difficult to practise.  
 If only you have the will. Stand up."  
 I stood up and called "I want."  
 May you have the will to let me want to."

**3.2 Utopia - the living dream - as religiosity that unites the whole of man's family** in a living dimension, stands out in Lessing within the framework of a teleological interpretation of history. A third period of history is coming, that of new, eternal Good News. This time for the fullness of revelation is the true theonoumen of reason, where the differences between people will be eliminated, that it will be characterized by a true ethic of humanism. Good will be done for its own sake and not for a promised reward. From then on human praxis will be determined by revelation enlightened by reason. But this state of Utopia cannot be described in detail, its novelty can only be projected in a prophetic manner, in the form of a parable, it can be expected by hoping it. No state in history can claim to be the full realization of what was hoped for. This eschatological reserve in view of the realization of the Utopia makes tolerance possible today. At the same time it challenges religions to practise in life what they pronounce in teaching. Righteousness through hope that Saladin expected from Nathan can only be accomplished through practical love "with the intimate submissiveness to God." This is the measure of the true faith and the justification of the contents formulated in the act of faith.

In Lessing the question regarding the mutual understanding between religions is formulated in a question regarding the possibility of a free and collective responsibility to history. At stake here are the formation of a more humane word and the salvation of men as expressions of God's manner of directing history. The Trinitarian moment that was emphasized in the dialogue about religions in Lull and Nicholas of Cusa is spelt back theistically in Lessing. The concrete realization of salvation in history is detached from its connection with God's revelation through Jesus Christ. But Lessing inherited from those dialogues the role of religions to interpret history as space for creative partnership between God's saving will and men's freedom. From this standpoint should all contradictions in the world be taken up: the question of the future of mankind in view of misused freedom, the responsibility towards creation that is not taken sensibly, the negative experiences.

Is there hope against hope for everything? From where do we acquire the spirit of opposition in times of depression? How bright is the new Jerusalem just now?

#### 4. *Attempt at a theological conclusion.*

The threefold mentioning of an utopian model for an understanding between religions shows us that peace and unity presuppose a sort of familiarity with the culture of dialogue, and an association with truth that refuses to contain it in the form of irreversible sentences and impose them on the other. When dialogue is seen as the life of truth then the decisive factor is not the unit of convictions but the unit of communication.

This standpoint presupposes that truth can also be found "outside" the definite boundaries of one's own religious system. But - I ask from the Christian side - is there really a dialogue as an open process in the search for truth, a risk at the very point of departure? Wasn't the dialogue in Lull rather a form of missionary contact, and in Nicholas of Cusa a didactic means to expose the true, i.e. Christian, fundamental tenets of faith, vis-à-vis the multiplicity of religious forms?

At this point Christian Theology of Religion should keep in mind that it, as *fides quaerens intellectum*, can never make itself identical with the Word of Revelation. With such instruments as reason and speech - stumbling but always correcting itself anew - Theology of religion seeks to understand itself "in enigmas and parables, in uncertainties and risks, even in mistakes and lies, all along the way" to the inner nature of faith. In this sense its mission is utopian, i.e. it has no place, except in dialogue, in that mutual giving and receiving, where the readiness to change place has vital importance.

In other words, it depends how effective one sees God's eschatological salvation activity, his universal will to salvation through the process of human history and how this confronts us with values and experiences unknown to us - in the daily life of other religions, and in each man that we encounter as our neighbour. Dialogue, then, is not just a simple encounter but an event in which the partners bring in their religious interpretation, to set it out as a question to the Other as well as to enrich the Other. The utopian ultimate objective wouldn't then be harmony or amalgamation of religions but a critical-creative symbiosis cataforical to different religious systems, that together seek to trace God's action in our human history.

But then, are religions equally true and therefore legitimate ways for realizing salvation? This question cannot be answered in the abstract - without a real analysis of the concrete realities and circumstances of the various religious systems. According to Christian understanding one must ask - and this is the idea behind understanding - whether the existing religious systems lead one to a life in the truth, that makes one free.

"Apart from their possible function as ways to salvation, religions in their historical constitution and depravity are often in *statu vitae* a compound of horrible excellence, truth, decay, mistake and lies. Christianity is no exception, because in its self-estimation as *vera religio*, as we have come to learn and affirm since the Theology of the Fathers, no partial or global legitimation can be deduced to justify the diverse components that belong or are associated with this religious system".

In this sense all religions stand under the same judgment of truth. Their interpretation of existence, their image of man, their system of norms, must remain open to discussion "if they are to be involved responsibly in the human struggle to find the right way for their future". In this case the Christian answer will place itself under the Word of the good News, as well as the practice of the Church to measure itself according to Jesus' teaching on God's Kingdom, that liberates and forms communities. Christians are challenged to give witness and accountability for the ever-changing power of the Gospel, that it may succeed to transform the culture in which they live. The Christian answer should also remain a critical stance against the culture of forgetfulness and progress that distort mankind, through the remembrance of Christ's life, death and resurrection. It should also keep in mind the sacrifice of our own religious self-affirmation through a compromise-free interest in promoting the freedom of all God's subjects.

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