Prophetic voice and search for peace
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"I do not offer you peace, brother man, because peace is not a medal: peace is a land enslaved and we have to go free her... Temples bend and bleed out. Throwing ourselves into love is enough for us.

Jorge Debravo [1]

What is central, decisive and defining, in the great religious traditions, is reverence for the sacred, the affirmation of the value of human life in all its manifestations and the preservation of nature as divine creation. Genuine religiosity tends to re-link human beings with their neighbors, near and far, who trace their particular pilgrimage in existence, in the hopeful search for a meaning that confers lasting dignity despite its inescapable fragility.

Hence the reciprocal sympathy, so naturally between deeply spiritual souls like Isaiah, the Jesus of the Gospels, Muhammad, Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama, despite their great doctrinal and cultural differences. Restorative tenderness and prophetic passion converge in them. If you look closely we are faced with a surprising paradox: Isaiah, Jesus, Merton, Luther King, Jr. Gandhi, Tutu, Francisco and the Dalai Lama, embody the divine and reconciling affection for humanity, with all its blemishes and defects, and However, sometimes they exclaim saturated with uncontainable prophetic indignation:

Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches?

(Isaiah 10:1-3)
Without a doubt, you can find in the canonical writings of the various religions, dark images of repudiation and violence against those who contaminate the integrity of the cultic identity. The holy Israelite wars, the Christian crusades, the Islamic jihad, the oppressive servitudes, the despotic hierarchies and the intolerances of all kinds have been justified by alluding to sacred texts. Thus, the Inquisition imposed the restriction on freedom of worship, patriarchy the subordination of women, Christian Europeans the subjugation of so many native peoples, and modern fundamentalists their homophobic prejudices. The "word of God" has been used too many times to devastate solidarity, conscience and hope. But, these “texts of terror” are not the decisive nor predominant ones in the religious traditions that humanity has forged throughout its history, although sometimes repressive and exclusive brotherhoods try to transfer them from the peripheral chapels to the main altar.

Genuine religious thought, to reflect on the fate of human history, never highlights the dark symbols of Armageddon and their riders’ terror, but the hope of liberation and universal reconciliation. Indeed, dark apocalyptic-minded writers such as Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins have exploited the streak of eternal terror in a series of novels popular with fundamentalist evangelicals. The mediocrity of these pseudo-theological and pseudo-literary artifacts compares nothing, incidentally, with the sublime way in which James Joyce describes dread at the traditional images of eternal hell, in his classic A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916). What in the great Irish writer is sublime tragedy, is reduced, in the American apocalypses, to superficial farce.

The central thing, in the transhistorical images of our sacred writings, is not the terror or the violence of the jealous and exclusive God. It is rather the vision of a “new heaven and a new earth” (Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21), where human beings can plant wheat and eat their bread in peace, harvest grapes and drink their wine with shared rejoicing, build houses and sleep peacefully. This universal aspiration for peace and solidarity responds to the most genuine of the religious creative imagination. It is certainly an arduous vision to capture historically. But, it is an expression of the perpetual dialogue between reason and the human heart, determined to forge earthly approaches.
to the myth of paradise and the apocalyptic aspiration of the new Jerusalem. In our earthly and historical utopias throb, as the German philosopher Ernst Bloch pointed out,[4] the scriptural eschatological images of the final reconciliation between divinity, humanity and nature.

Combining the prophetic denunciation and the demand for reconciliation between enemy lands is a complex task, but necessary and possible, as demonstrated, in the ecclesiastical environment, by the South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and, in the secular literary, the Indian writer Arundhati Roy and the feminist Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi.[5] Fortunately, it does not start at zero. There is considerable collection of theoretical reflection and action strategies that link the prophetic denunciation civil resistance and non-violent, which can be assumed from different political perspectives, philosophical and theological.[6]

The thesis of the “conflict of civilizations”, of the inescapable hostility between the Christian West and Muslim East, so fashionable in certain North Atlantic circles after its articulated exposition by Samuel Huntington[7] is a variant of the anachronistic suspicion of Islam. Although he correctly perceives the importance of religious differences for international conflicts in the post-Cold War era, he fails to get rid of the prejudice of the superiority of Western civilization.[8] Intellectually and politically sterile, the thesis of the conflict between the Christian West and the Islamic world is only the reverse of the bitter anti-Westernism of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. It is ironic that, at times, the American political leadership, with its constant allusions to all-out war against those it labels as incarnations of absolute evil, reproduces the Manichean cosmic rhetoric of its adversary. Such a confrontation rather resembles a "conflict of fundamentalisms," as Tariq Ali has shrewdly suggested.[9] Nor should we be naive. Erasmo already showed with great acuity, in the sixteenth century, that after the pious proclamations of the war against Muslim Ottomans, branded as "enemies of Christ", the desire for wealth prevailed on many occasions.[10]

Those who today make preventive war a fundamental axis of the foreign policy of the most powerful country in the world use in their public statements a language that tends to identify the enemies of the nation as adversaries of God.[11] In this way, very earthly conflicts acquire cosmic
dimensions: the perpetual confrontation between the children of light and those of darkness. The times vary, but the ambition of power, prestige and peculiarity continues to be hidden in religious devotion.\[12\]

Despite such persistent ominous signs, and although some Christian hierarchs, Zionist rabbis, and Islamic imams have not noticed, the crusades, holy wars, and jihads have lost historical force. The people of Christian tradition, instead of accentuating the apology against Islam, should, on the contrary, design instances of communication, understanding and dialogue. Especially if we take into account that although various missionary leaders proclaimed, in the early twentieth century, the globalization of Christianity, in its end the result was a greater, absolute and proportional increase in Islam.\[13\] The complex internal diversity of Islam contradicts the cartoonish image of the Muslim enemy that certain apologists for new crusades try to project.\[14\] Furthermore, in its central canonical traditions, Islam shares ethical perspectives not unlike those of the followers of the Gospels or the Talmud.

Clueless also seems, to me, the thesis, recently outlined by some Christian authors, that the notable difference between Christianity and Islam lies in the absence of a "sacred" language in the former, while the canonical texts of the latter are unfailingly linked to the Arab.\[15\] From this distinction they deduce an essential difference between Christianity and Islam, attributing to the latter rigidity and inflexibility regarding cultural diversity. They are sophisticated subterfuges that preserve the hostile stance towards Islamism that fatally runs through the entire history of the Christian West. Furthermore, these apologists forget the excessive frequency with which, in Christianity and Judaism, the idolatry of the sacred letter has become abominable for those who do not share it, something that Baruch Spinoza rightly pointed out in the seventeenth century.\[16\] the splendid heterodox Jew, stigmatized by the church and the synagogue, of whom Jorge Luis Borges, with much admiration, wrote:

"Someone builds God in the dim light ...
He’s a jew
Of sad eyes and sallow skin ...
From his illness, from his nothingness,
Keep building God with the word. ”[17]

The idolatry of the sacred letter led, occasionally, in Christianity, to the execution of women considered sorceresses (Exodus 22:18 - "You will not leave the sorceress alive")[18] or to the non-virgin bride (Deuteronomy 22:20-21). Men with social power and violent souls quoted those texts before proceeding to blind troubled female lives. Today many dogmatic believers rely on other canonical texts to justify discrimination against homosexuals, with a discursive logic very similar to that which their predecessors used against the abolition of slavery or female emancipation. [19]. That idolatry of the sacred word has been the inspiration for frequent holy wars, crusades, jihads and pogroms. Countless human beings have been sacrificed on the altar of jealous, exclusive and unforgiving gods.

It is imposed as a vital necessity for the peace and well-being of humanity, to promote intercultural and inter-religious dialogue and to silence strident and degrading confrontations. If this intercultural and interreligious dialogical perspective is not followed, we run the risk of promoting and sacralizing the globalization of sacred violence. It is necessary to forge paths of dialogue, mutual recognition and mutual respect and, above all, of ties of solidarity and mercy, between the different historical religiosities. It is not a matter of polite and superficial irenism, of the salon. Nothing less than the future of humanity is at stake. Otherwise, as Leonardo Boff writes with his usual grace, humans "can suffer the fate of dinosaurs."[20]

Today it is especially important to foster creative dialogue between the three great monotheistic religions that originated in the Near East and that consider the city of Jerusalem as a sacred city. Is it too utopian to dream that one day Jerusalem, with its so tragic and bloody history, will be a symbol of coexistence in peace and harmony between worshipers of different incarnations of the sacred? Is it feasible to imagine that not far from the wailing wall a monument to the harmony between Christians, Jews and Islamists will be erected not too far away, celebrating the end of the holy, crusade, pogrom and jihads wars? Is it perhaps illusory to think of a future in
which Jerusalem, the sacred city that for millennia has witnessed so much violence and aggression, lives up to the etymology of its name: “city of peace”? [21]

It is time to forge what the Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz called "the ekumene of compassion", an inclusive project of solidarity with human suffering that transcends the borders of Christendom.[22]. By compassion, let us clarify, it is understood here not the paternal indulgence, but the "suffering with", the identification and solidarity with those who suffer the terrifying "mystery of iniquity" (II Thessalonians 2:7). The link of the prophetic urgency for justice and compassion for human pain, that is intensely expressed in beings as disparate and yet as twinned as Isaiah, Jesus, Muhammad and Gautama Buddha, constitutes a sacrament of hope for a world still troubled by violence, despotism, national, ethnic and cultural discrimination, androcentric patriarchy and homophobia. This ecumenism of compassion can be nourished by the turn towards human affliction that manifested itself in various religious sensibilities of the late twentieth century and that in the long run can serve as a counterweight to the homicidal passion of the "warriors of God". [23]

Regarding diverse cultural and religious traditions, the challenge is to overcome mere tolerance and learn to appreciate the "dignity of difference", as Jewish rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls it.[24] What we are dealing with today is valuing and enjoying diversity in peace. It is the only way to bury modern racism in the cemetery of nightmares, the most ominous expression of which was the famous phrase by Carl Schmitt, political philosopher and ideologist of Nazi anti-Semitism: "Not everyone with a human face is a human being."[25]

That such ecumenism of compassion is a dream, a utopia? Certainly, but the human being is constituted by the nobility and the courage of his dreams, of his utopian aspirations. For this reason, I have always preferred Utopia, by Tomás Moro, to El príncipe, by Nicolás Maquiavelo, both texts written at the birth of Western modernity. In the face of the deadly pragmatism of the royalists forged in Machiavelli, Hobbes and Clausewitz, on the one hand, and the apocalyptic atrocities of warlike fundamentalisms, on the other; isn't it preferable to dream of the passionately
erotic moment in which “justice and peace kiss each other”, as the biblical psalm says (Psalm 86:10)?

Those who aspire to be Christians must not forget that the Jesus of the Gospels never made adherence to dogmas, ecclesiastical hierarchies or ritual prescriptions, the decisive factor in his message. Jesus was always very unorthodox in his predilections: he preferred the caring and compassionate Samaritan over the pious Levite or the devoted priest (Luke 10: 29-37). His radical challenge leads rather to fully assume solidarity and compassion with those whom Franz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth."

Only in this way can men and women of faith set limits to the voracity of those who seek to continue the legacy of death and destruction of the past century. Only in this way those who live between terror and hope can sing the biblical hymn to peace:

How beautiful they are on the mountains
the feet of the messenger who announces peace!

(Isaiah 52:7a)


[10] Erasmus, "Very useful consultation on the declaration of war against the Turkish", in *Selected Works* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1964), 997-1027. See also his "Peace Complaint" (ibid., 965-994) classic work of antiwar literature.


[13] Islam grew from almost 200,000,000 faithful in 1900 to nearly 1,200,000,000 in 2000; or, in other words, from 12.35 to 19.6 percent of the world population. David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, “Status of Global Mission, 2004, in Context of 20th and 21st Centuries,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 28, No. 1, January 2004, 25. According to these Statistics, Christianity went from almost 560,000,000 faithful, in 1900, to nearly 2,000,000,000, in 2000, a proportional reduction from 34.5 percent to 33 percent.


[23] A notable example is Latin American liberation theology, whose origins have been masterfully studied by Samuel Silva Gotay, *Revolutionary Christian Thought in Latin America: Implications of Liberation Theology for the Sociology of Religion* (Salamanca: Ediciones Follow Me, 1981; Salamanca / San Juan: Ediciones Sígueme / Editorial Cordillera, 1983; Santo Domingo: Ediciones de CEPAE, 1985; Rio Piedras:
Editorial Huracán, 1989) [tr. to Portuguese: O pensão cristão revolucionário na América Latina e no Caribe (1960-1973) (São Paulo: Edições Paulinas, 1985); tr. to German; Christentum und Revolution in Lateinamerika und der Karibik: Die Bedeutung der Theologie der Befreiung für eine Soziologie der Religion (Frankfurt am Main: Würzburger Studien zur Fundamentaltheologie, Band 17, 1995)].
