



***Interreligious Dialogue* before and after Nicholas of Cusa: an Exegetical Approach**

El *Diálogo Interreligioso* antes y después de Nicolás de Cusa: una aproximación exegetica

O *Diálogo Inter-Religioso* antes e depois de Nicolau de Cusa: uma aproximação exegetica

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Abstract: In this article my aim is a philosophical reflection on a history of interreligious dialogue from the perspective of the dialectical relation between rites of different religions: given that rite is one of the most essential aspects of religions, it should be profitable to examine the significance of rites in light of interreligious dialogue. First, I will explain some theories about religions' difference. I will analyse texts written by Christian and Jewish authors from the Middle Ages to the Modern period in order to compare the crucial role of rite in philosophical and religious discourse among different chronological and cultural panoramas. Among the authors who wrote outstanding works focused on the relations between Islam and Christendom, I wish to mention in particular Nicholas of Cusa, who wrote the *De pace fidei*, one of the most famous interreligious dialogue in the Middle Ages. The following paragraph of my article is on a 12th century Jewish scholar, Judah Halevi, who wrote the book *Kitab al Khazari* (Sefer ha-Kuzari, in Hebrew), which is considered one of the most polemical and well-known medieval works and a source of Ramon Llull (1235-1315), the most relevant source of the *De pace fidei*. The second paragraph is on Abelard, who, like Cusanus, wrote his *Dialogus inter philosophum, Judaeum et Christianum* in a period of conflicts and violence. Like *De pace fidei* Abelard's dialogue is a work of the author's maturity which deals with the theme of rational and intellectual knowledge as an instrument of confrontation between different confessions. I will analyse the theme of rites in this Abelard's work. I will also take a look of the work of Lessing, to

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highlight the fundamental role of transmission of traditions and rites for the construction of a specific religious identity.

Resumo: Neste artigo, meu objetivo é uma reflexão filosófica sobre a história do diálogo inter-religioso a partir da perspectiva da relação dialética entre ritos de religiões diferentes. Como o rito é um dos aspectos mais essenciais da religião, deve ser rentável para examinar o significado dos ritos à luz do diálogo inter-religioso. Em primeiro lugar, vou explicar algumas teorias sobre as diferenças entre as religiões. Vou analisar textos escritos por autores judeus e cristãos da Idade Média para a Idade Moderna, a fim de comparar o papel crucial do rito no discurso filosófico e religioso entre os diferentes panoramas cronológicos e culturais. Entre os autores que escreveram obras pendentes com foco nas relações entre o Islã e a Cristandade, gostaria de mencionar, em particular, Nicolau de Cusa, que escreveu *De fidei*, um dos diálogos inter-religiosos mais famosos da Idade Média. O seguinte parágrafo do meu artigo é sobre um estudioso judeu do século XII, Judah Halevi, que escreveu o livro *Kitab al Khazari* (*Sefer ha-Kuzari*, em hebraico), que é considerado uma das obras medievais mais polêmicas e bem conhecidas e uma fonte de Ramon Llull (1235-1315), a fonte mais relevante do ritmo fidei de. O segundo parágrafo é sobre Abelard, que, como Nicolau de Cusa, escreveu seu *Dialogus entre philosophum, Judaeum et Christianum* em um período de conflitos e violência. Como o diálogo de *De ritmo fidei Abelardo* é uma obra de maturidade do autor, que aborda o tema do conhecimento racional e intelectual como instrumento de confronto entre diferentes confissões. Vou analisar o tema dos ritos de trabalho deste Abelardo. Além disso, vou dar uma olhada da obra de Lessing, para destacar o papel fundamental da transmissão das tradições e ritos para a construção de uma identidade religiosa específica.

Keywords: Interreligious Dialogue – Nicholas of Cusa – Exegesis – Hermeneutic – Rites.

Palavras-chave: Diálogo Interreligioso – Nicolau de Cusa – Exegese – Hermenêutica – Ritos.

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I. Introduction

The Lebanese poet Abbas Beydoun, in his article *The west and us now*,² asks about the significance of the term “us”: does the term embrace Arabs, Muslims, or Middle-eastern people? These terms are not synonymous: to be Arab means to be not Iranian, to be Muslim means to be not Christian, to be Middle-eastern means to be not western. Yet, a subject can synthesize the three characters; one can be Muslim, Middle-eastern, and Arab. The problem of identity is, thus, at first glance, a problem of different identities, a question of plural identities, which exclude or include. “Most probably, identities are a mixture that calls itself purity, a hybrid that calls itself originality, and a plurality that calls itself uniqueness; in other words, identities are psychological necessities, a voluntary complicity, reactions against fear and abuse.”³

Pluralism exacerbates the difficulties of identity. For instance, Arab scholars imagine the West in many various ways.⁴ Some of them think of the West as the land of the crusades against Islam; others as the western empire that wants to dominate the global market; and others write of the West as the home of rationalism and democratic values. In each case, the “West” remains an “Arab invention.”⁵

Abdo Abboud⁶ examines some models of the intercultural European dialogue, particularly in the literature of the post-Enlightenment. Abboud recalls that Goethe was a passionate scholar of the Arab-Muslim cultures: as a theorist of *Weltliteratur*, the German poet played a relevant role in the constructive dialogue among different cultures. The heritage of every culture is formed by contacts and exchanges over thousands of years, and only deep study and careful exegesis can help to reconstruct their evolution.⁷

Since the second half of the twentieth century, interreligious dialogue has been considered an integral part of intercultural dialogue. According to Robert

² Abbas Beydoun (2006).

³ Abbas Beydoun (2006), 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Abbas Beydoun (2006), 33.

⁶ Abdo Abboud (2006).

⁷ Abbas Beydoun (2006), 51.



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Schreier, “the Interreligious Dialogue is an act of intercultural communication and the conditions of intercultural Hermeneutics as these apply to the interreligious dialogue.”⁸ The textual levels of the discourse on the interreligious dialogue coalesce into three narrative contexts: the social-historical narration of a culture, the reciprocal understanding between interlocutors, and the interaction among cultures. There are three elements of the textual hermeneutic: the testimony of the written document, the comprehension, and the construction of a shared significance. Hermeneutic indeed, is a sort of exegetical work on the texts. Schreier’s approach recalls the position of Father Dall’Oglio of the Syrian centre for the interreligious dialogue at Mar Musa, who asserts the centrality of the hermeneutics of the sacred texts to the formation of the dialoguing parties.⁹

The topic of religious difference remains a key point of the exchange between the West and the East, so it is necessary to comprehend how to deal with this difference, i.e., how to consider the religious problem. Talal Asad lays out a profitable path:¹⁰ he traces a genealogy of religion by reading symbolic forms, rituals, and texts, which should be interpreted with the use of the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. Dealing with the concept of ritual, he underlines the symbolic meaning of the ritual and asks what are the theoretical consequences of this interpretation.

In fact, symbols can be studied in a multiple ways. Rite develops from practice to symbol, i.e., it transforms itself from daily practice into a representation of the sense of this practice, just as practical action develops into conceptual writing. “Symbols, as I said, call for interpretation, and even as interpretative criteria are extended, so interpretations can be multiplied. Disciplinary practices, on the other hand, cannot be varied so easily, because learning to develop moral capabilities is not the same thing as learning to invent representations.”¹¹

Clifford Geertz¹² affirms that religion is the conceptual result of historical-social conditions and a concept prone to variations and elaborations over the

⁸ Robert Schreier (2002).

⁹ <http://www.deirmarmusa.org>

¹⁰ Talal Asad (1993).

¹¹ Talal Asad (1993), 79.

¹² Cfr. Clifford Geertz (1973).



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course of time. Geertz suggests the following definition of “religion”: “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men.”¹³ Religion is here considered in a semiotic way, revealing its political and social function: the religious phenomenon is a symbolic system, representing specific elements that are able to induce substantial modifications in a person, thus consolidating the sense of cultural belonging.

Similarly, Jan Assmann,¹⁴ in his research on cultural memory, notes that the forms of the symbolization of identity have as their major goal the strengthening of the awareness of social belonging, of “collective identity.” This is based on participation in a common knowledge and memory, passed on through common language or, more generally, through a common symbolic system.¹⁵

Everything could be a sign to codify proximity: it is not the medium but the symbolic function and the semiotic structure that are decisive. Assmann asserts that religion is a typical case of an anachronic structure, i.e., an institution based on preservation rather than progress. Inside the culture, that forms the reality, it maintains as current the past that has not been forgotten: “its function is the transmission of the non-contemporary through memory, actualization and repetition.”¹⁶

The continuity of traditions and religious and cultural perpetuation is guaranteed by the rite, which by repetition consolidates the sense of belonging. “Rituality exists to maintain the system of the collective’s identity. The rites make the knowledge substantial to those participating for the constitution of identity.”¹⁷ Thus, according to Assmann, collective identity is guaranteed through rituality. Here one finds the essence of religion articulated as an act based on the original bond with origins (*re ligare*), memory, and commemoration which preserves,¹⁸ woven together with problem of the

¹³ Clifford Geertz (1973), 90.

¹⁴ Jan Assmann (1997).

¹⁵ Jan Assmann (1997), 107.

¹⁶ Jan Assmann (1997), 95.

¹⁷ Jan Assmann (1997), 111.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*



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identity. If religion preserves and consolidates the identity, is an interreligious dialogue really possible?

Regarding the construction of the Tower of Babel, Assmann writes: “it is written in Gn 11, 4 “Come, let us build a city and a tower whose the top reaches the sky: let us make a name so that we are not scattered on the earth.” What does “name” mean if not the embodiment and the main symbol of an ethno-political identity? Moreover, what does the fear of being scattered on the earth mean if not the desire for integration? Even here the desired ethno-political macro-identity must find its evident expression through an enormous construction.”¹⁹ The representation of power is found suitable for the consolidation of the collective’s sense of a political community.

In the article *Fur eine Dialog der Kulteren*,²⁰ Helga Zepp-La Rouche analyses the problem of intercultural dialogue and she critiques Huntington’s theory about “the clash of civilizations.”²¹ According to Huntington, there are irreconcilable differences between different religions – Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam and Christianity. Zepp-La Rouche,²² analysing the book of Samuel Huntington, *The soldier and the State*,²³ identifies a central theme in the intercultural dialogue, i.e., the extreme facility with which you can manipulate the human beings, after inculcating a creed.²⁴

Fred Dallmayr²⁵, too, makes an interesting comparison between *De pace fidei* and the Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. According to this author, the

¹⁹ Jan Assmann (1997), 115.

²⁰ Helga Zepp-La Rouche (2002).

²¹ Samuel Huntington (1997).

²² H. Zepp-La Rouche, (2002), 2.

²³ Samuel Huntington, (1957).

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ F. R. DALLMAYR, Nicola Cusano, L’infinito e la pace, *Reset* 97, (Sept. Oct. 2006), pp. 64-66. On Comparative Political Thought se. : A. PAREL, R.C. KEITH, *Comparative Political Philosophy, Studies Under the Upas Tree*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sahe Publications, 1992; F. R. DALLMAYR, *Civilizational Dialogue and Political Thought: Tehran papers*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2007. ID., *Border crossings: toward a Comparative Political Theory*, Lexington Books, 1999; R. EUBEN, *Enemy in the mirror*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1999. C. J. NEDERMAN, *Worlds of Difference: European Discourses of Toleration c. 1100-1550*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000; A. SEN, *Identità e violenza*, Italian translation, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006. T. SHÖGIMEN, C. J. NEDERMAN, *Western Political Thought in Dialogue with Asia*, Lanham, Lexington Books,



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themes of learned ignorance and coincidence of the opposites tackled by Nicholas of Cusa show close affinities with the Buddhist teachings, and especially with those of the philosopher Mahayana Nagarjuna and his outline of a middle way between opposites. Furthermore, Nicholas of Cusa' thesis concerning the “non-other” (*non aliud*) nature of the divine shows many similarities with the Hindu Brahman concept developed by Veda philosophy.

An analysis of the problem of interreligious dialogue leads us unavoidably to wonder about the nature of discrimination of the other on grounds of religious difference. This is, in my opinion, a key issue we must always bear in mind and stress when we talk about interreligious dialogue, as we should first of all wonder whether a genuinely philosophical, platonic dialogue is possible when we start from different religious positions.

Determining to what extent linguistics and discourse order are implied in this discussion seems evident in itself: the organization of thought, its elaboration, the use of figures, are all elements that cannot be disregarded both for understanding a text, and consequently an idea. I availed myself of Assmann's theory to achieve a deeper exegetic approach to the text, on the other, as regards the comprehension of interreligious dialogue. The exegetic approach helps to investigate the use of metaphors, sources and text comparison in order to ascertain the way in which different authors' positions on interreligious dialogue were constructed.

It aims therefore at giving a double contribution to research: first, to succeed in understanding the genealogy of the concept of interreligious dialogue in the major works of the history of Western thought by analysing its continuity and repetition within each writing. The second contribution is a reflection on how dialogue between different confessions can be interpreted, and which are the primary conceptual consideration it is based on. Is there a non-theological and not exclusively philosophical - but instead a historical-cultural – way to approach this issue so as to fully understand its political value?

2008, H. BASHIR, *Visions of Alterity; the Impact of Cross-Cultural Contacts on European Self-Understanding in the Pre-Enlightenment Period*, Doctorate Thesis, December 2008, Texas A&M University, 2008.



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II. Yehudah ha-Lewi

In 1086, Yehudah ha-Lewi – a Jewish doctor, poet, and philosopher and author of *The King of the Khazars* – was born in Castile. The King of the Khazars originally was written in Arabic (original title is *Al hujjah wa 'd-Dalil fi Nasr ad-Din adh-dhalil*), and it contains theological considerations of the king of Khazars, a Volga pagan people who had converted to Judaism in the eighth century. This dialogue begins thus:

I was asked to say what kind of arguments I had against our opponents, the philosophers: I remembered what I had heard about the debate between a Wise and the king of Khazars [...]. This king had a recurring dream in which an angel spoke to him and said: “God loves your intentions but not your actions.”²⁶

There is a distinct gap between attitude toward the divine (good intentions) and the observance of Law (actions). The dialogue is structured as an apology for Judaism against attacks by Muslim theologians and by religious sects such as Karaites. In the third part of the dialogue, the king asks the sage who is the true servant of God; the wise man’s initial response is as follows: precepts, such as sacrifice of a goat, what part of a goat can be eaten, and so on, must be followed exactly, since in worship of God there is no room for opinion, speculation, or quibbling.

Law defines rituals in detail so there is no margin for personal initiative, and sacred rite is endowed with uniformity. This uniformity indeed consolidates the identity of the Jewish people and differentiates them from the political community. This mechanism is obviously proper to all religious groups and shows how rite builds identity.

Individual initiative must be carefully avoided. The Khazar asks how this biblical phrase can be interpreted: “You will not add and will not remove anything of law.”²⁷ The sage replies: “That is said for the people, so nobody will innovate anything, and will not make skilful with science, in order to establish some laws on his own.”²⁸ The rite requires assiduous perseverance

²⁶ Yehudah ha-Lewi, 19.

²⁷ Deuteronomio 12, 32.

²⁸ Yehudah ha-Lewi, 129.



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in practice, and this continuity strengthens the political community into itself (thus differentiating it from outsiders), and facilitates governance. Culture can operate in the sense of division and separation, and if the rite is an expression of cultural memory, it works as a cohesive element and at the same time as an element of separation inside the community. As Assmann affirms:

The creative power of stratifications and inequalities of culture [and rituals] can perform in two ways: in socio-cultural differentiation, which separates experts and specialists from the illiterate crowd, and in differentiation of ethnology, which sets against the fine lifestyles of upper classes to those “rough of the mass.”²⁹

Examining the different rites, Yehudah deals with the theme of circumcision: circumcision is a sign related to the Jewish birth, and it distinguishes between one who is converted to Judaism and who was born into it.³⁰ According to Yehudah, the rite of circumcision as a corporal sign marks the separation among social groups. In the third part of the dialogue, Yehudah argues the problem of purity and of rites: “impurity and sanctity are two connected things: and if one is not found, the other is not found.”

The wise man asserts that impurity prohibits touching every “sacred thing,” in the same way the holiness prevents touching “what is visible,” even if sanctity is not prohibited by the Law. For example, the prohibition against touching a menstruating woman exists not because of impurity but because the Law affirms it. The wise man underlines the difficulty of grasping the true meaning of Law and asserts that this is the main reason to observe precepts, without asking questions that only the prophets can answer.

Purity and impurity are essential elements of human existence, and Yehudah does not ascribe to them any relationship to rites; but it is worthwhile to pay attention to his admonition that “the limits of precepts form a hedge around Law.”³¹ The relevance of rites merges in religious tradition: observance of the Law is manifested through precepts and rites, and therefore science and disquisition are no sufficient.

²⁹ Jan Assmann (1997), 116.

³⁰ Yeduah-ha Levi, 175.

³¹ Yeduah-ha Levi, 170.



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III. Abelard

Peter Abelard (1079-1142), in his *Dialogus inter philosophum, iudaeum, et christianum*, proposes the following problem: the practice of faith is expressed in different ways, as mentioned by the Jew in dialogue with the philosopher.³² The Jew complains that the cause of separation of Jewish people from community are many commandments, including circumcision. Circumcision is not considered benignly, nor are food prohibitions that Jews must observe. Then the philosopher asks why the Jews persist in obeying the commandments imposed on them; the Jew replies that the precepts mark the separation between Jewish people and pagan people, and for this reason, they must be observed.³³

Indeed, because of circumcision, it is not possible to consummate marriages between Jewish men and pagan women, so social groups remain separate,³⁴ avoiding cultural contamination. In the dialogue of Abelard, the physical sign of circumcision has then a double reference: one linked to the tradition, the other tied to a socio-political distinction. The Jews are a different part of the political community, and this difference is always recalled by a private, corporal sign that is closely intertwined with Jewish commandments, obligations, and religious prohibitions. The rite of circumcision clearly shows that invasive practices on a subject, however intimate, never have simply an individual reference but carry a much larger and broader meaning; they are expressions of exercised and suffered power, i.e., dynamics of bio-powers.³⁵

The Jew, in another part of the dialogue of Abelard, focuses on the observance of precepts, referring to the passage in Leviticus: “If you walk

³² Abelard, 240-46. “Fidem tecum de unius Dei veritate communem habeo; eque ipsum fortassis, ut tu, diligo, et ex operibus, que tu non habes id in super exibeo. Quid mihi hec opera, si non prosint, officiant, etiam si non sint precepta, quia non sunt prohibita?”

³³ Ivi, 579-585. Postquam autem Dominus Abraham de terra et de cognitione sua eduxit, ut ei et semini eius terram in hereditatem daret, per quam a gentibus segregantur, corporalibus quoque legis operibus eos penitus separare decrevit, ut tanto minus fideles ab infidelibus corpumpi possent quanto amplius ab ipsis tam loco quam corporibus disiungerentur.

³⁴ Jan Platvoet, J. van der Toorn, (1995).

³⁵ Mary Douglas (2002), 203. As Mary Douglas asserts: “The rituals are the form of social relationships, giving these relations visible expression. Rituals influence the political structure through the symbolic medium of the physical body.”



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along my commandments, I will put my home into you and my soul will not abhor you.”³⁶ The Jew says: “God orders to separate different religions through different rites.”³⁷ The difference between Jewish people and infidelibus is marked by precepts (*operum ritibus*).

In addition to this function, rituals have the power to ensure access to safety, to true bliss, because the imposed bans of law are created to avoid sin.³⁸ Salvation is certain for those who are cleansed from sin, and this purification comes through ritual practices and observance of precepts. The blessing in the Old Testament is the source of all good things, and the loss of this blessing causes the fall of or humankind: in order to understand the concept of “sanctity” in Leviticus, it is necessary to understand that precepts are based on the separation of holiness from abomination.³⁹

The concept of holiness includes concepts of separation⁴⁰ and probity: a holy thing is free of contamination, it is pure. Thus strict dietary restrictions are aimed at preserving purity; these prohibitions function as “symbols that led to meditation about the oneness, the purity and completeness of God. By the rules of abstention, holiness received a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom, at every meal.”⁴¹ Likewise, the Christian argues on the precept that states “when you have done all that you had been ordered, you say: ‘We are unworthy servants, we did what we had to do.’” What the precept requires must be done as fulfilling a requested duty, nothing more.

IV. Nicholas of Cusa

Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), with his *De pace fidei*, as Zepp-La Rouche highlights, attempted to create a dialogue among many different points of view. The most surprising thing is that the dialogue was composed in a highly

³⁶ Levitico 26, 3 a, 11.

³⁷ Abelardo, *Dialogus*, 843–45.

³⁸ Abelardo, *Dialogus*, 870–873. “Quid etiam ad purificationem vel emundationem nostram atque indulgentiam peccatorum lex aliqua in sacrificiis vel ceteris observationibus fieri iubet, si hoc ad veram beatitudinem nihil attineat.”

³⁹ Mary Douglas (2002), 94.

⁴⁰ Emile Benveniste (1969).

⁴¹ Mary Douglas (2002), 104.



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charged period for Europe, i.e., after the fall of Constantinople in 1453.⁴² The central theme of the *De pace fidei* is Nicholas' conviction that all religions can find agreement in a common and universal truth. "Unterschiedlichen Theologien" offers the opportunity for dialogue and resolution of religious wars.

The *De pace fidei*⁴³ could be considered a model of interreligious dialogue: it features debates among representatives of eighteen different cults, all liturgical descendants of the three Abrahamic religions. The first series of arguments is focused around the concept of *diversitas*, as necessary and constitutional for the political community. Here Nicholas uses dialogue and comparison to analyse the principle of the recognition of difference. He starts with an analysis of some rites of the Tartar people, the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims, and he stressed that the mutual difference often become a reason of scorn (*deridere*).⁴⁴

The verb *derident*, referring to the rites, is not used casually by Nicholas of Cusa: this verb denotes the crux of the discussion about the confrontation between very different religions, in this case, Christianity and the monotheistic religion of the Tartars. The latter deride the rites of the Christians and Muslims and those of the Jews; they deride the Eucharist, circumcision, and baptism. The spokesman for the Tartars, Tartarus, describes as *abominabilis*⁴⁵ Christian rites such as the sacrificial act (the Eucharist) in which they eat and drink the body of the man they adore.

The dialogue then reverts to Paul, called *doctor gentium*,⁴⁶ and on behalf of the Word, the author of *De pace fidei* makes Paul say that it is essential to demonstrate that the salvation of the soul is achieved not through the virtue

⁴² Jos Decorte (2005), 109. Decorte affirms: "Amidst the deafening cries for revenge in the form of a crusade against the Turks, Nicolas is alone voice crying for peace."

⁴³ Nicolai de Cusa, (ed. 1970).

⁴⁴ *De pace fidei*; XVI; 54; 15–20; 1; 9. Tartari multi et simplices, unum Deum ut plurimum colentes, admirantur varietatem rituum aliorum etiam eundem cum ipsis Deum colentium. Nam aliquos ex Christianis, omnes Arabes et Iudaeos circumcisos, alios signatos in facie adustionibus, alios baptizatos derident. Deinde circa matrimonium tanta est diversitas, quia alius habet tantum unam, alius unam veram sibi matrimonio unitam sed plures concubinas, alius etiam plures legitimas.

⁴⁵ *De pace fidei*, XVI, 51.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.



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of works but through faith. Only when the diversity of rites is interpreted thusly, as a visible sign of the truth of faith, will it cease to cause trouble among religions (*Signa autem mutationem capiunt not signatum*).⁴⁷

Tartarus is certainly struck by the words of Paul, but he complains about the possibility of bringing the Tartars, which means “uneducated people,” to understand the truths of Christianity and to believe in Christ as the only way to achieve happiness. Referring to this perplexity, Paul answers that both Arabs and Christians confess that.⁴⁸ Tartarus, at this point, says he is absolutely convinced and satisfied with Paul’s explanations, and he claims that the faith is necessary for the salvation⁴⁹; however, he questions whether faith can be sufficient. Paul contends that without faith, no one can please God, and this faith must be formed or expressed through the observance of the commandments. Since, however, as noted by the Tartar, every religion claims to have received its commands through their Messiah: Moses to Jews, Muhammad to Arabs, and Jesus to Christians, and through the Messiah is possible to reach the concordance.⁵⁰

The commandments of God, Paul recalls, are very few, known and common to all peoples. They consist simply of either believing in God or acting in a manner guided by love for one’s neighbour. The Tartar agrees with these points but argues that the rites of various religions are very different from each other and that, in his view, those who do not respect given rites will most likely deride those who perform them. The solution for Nicholas of Cusa is “to tolerate different rites to find a peaceful solution.”⁵¹

In the dialogue with the Arab,⁵² the Word⁵³ discusses religions as approachable by learning from the human intellectual faculties, because each religion is characterized by different rites and by concrete signs of religion. Nicholas wonders how, through rational discourse, a road leading to peace

⁴⁷ *De pace fidei*, XVI, 52.

⁴⁸ *De pace fidei*, XVI, 54. “fateri Christum altissimum here omnium fuerunt aut erunt in hoc vel future saecula, et facies omnium gentium. Si igitur in uno semine est omnium gentium benedictio, non potest esse nisi Christus.”

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *De pace fidei*, XVI, p. 55.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² *De pace fidei*, VI.

⁵³ In *De pace fidei*, Paul, Peter, and Word are the interlocutori.



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can be found among religions. The answer can be found in the formula *religio una in rituum varietate*, viz., and agreement of all peoples in only one Orthodox faith, despite the variety of rites. Differences are tolerable in rites, but not in faith.

Rites are essential to the preservation of collective memory, and they perpetuate the sense of belonging to a given community, so it is necessary to preserve the rites specific to each confession.⁵⁴ Thus, the recitation of the Talmud, the Koran, or the Catholic sacraments are instrumental to the transmission of religion and culture within the society and avoidance of any conflict; this is because rituals are “the mirror of the Laws,” their expression in everyday life, the witness of the order prescribed by the Scriptures, regardless of scriptural genre book – old or new Testament or Koran.

V. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

I conclude this backwards glance on interreligious dialogues with a short excursus into the modern age. In the Enlightenment, Lessing (1729–1781) presents the problem of rites. In *Nathan der Weise*, a father who does not want to injure his children makes two rings similar to a very precious heirloom ring. When the rings are delivered, the father is not able to distinguish the original ring from the others. After his death, each son has a ring and each pretends to be the lord of manor, but it is impossible to demonstrate who has the authentic ring, as if it is impossible to demonstrate the authentic religion.⁵⁵

Saladin, to whom Nathan speaks, is really surprised, because the metaphor is not suitable to illustrate the problem that the men are discussing. In fact, asserts the Saladin, the religions are distinguishable even in costumes, food, and beverages: a religion is therefore distinguishable because of its different rites and precepts. Nathan answers⁵⁶ that, although the difference between religions is based on rites, the legacy of tradition guarantees the possibility of dialogue of different confessions: written or oral history assures the transmission of knowledge.⁵⁷ The sacred texts are part of the heritage that builds the collective memory of a political community. The memory is not

⁵⁴ Cfr. Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, Alexander Fidora (2004).

⁵⁵ G. E. Lessing, 157.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 158.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 158.



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transmitted through biological means, but it is necessary to maintain it through the generations: this is a problem of cultural Mnemotechnic, i.e., memorization, reactivation, and transmission of sense (in *Nathan der Weise* metaphor of ritual of ring that passes from father to son). The function of this cultural Mnemotechnic is contained in the continuity, viz., in the identity.⁵⁸

Writing modifies this mechanism of perpetuation, because writing means ordering, programming, and articulating: at first, writing is an instrument of domination of reality and of power's representation. Writing formalizes the discourse of power and of official identity: laws, decrees, acts, rites, sacrificial offerings. Writing means protecting, documenting, controlling, dominating, ordering, and codifying.⁵⁹ Writing is a device of power, an organ to convey guidelines. Rites, as well as writing, need internal coherence; data, schedules, conditions – everything is programmed according to tradition, and writing codifies this repetition.

Conclusion

Referring to the discourse of Abbas Beydoun, it is evident that a western woman is different from a Muslim man with respect to genre, geography, and religion. We must likewise assume that in the political community, religious differences play a decisive role through daily practices, rites, and prayers, which build cultural diversities. If rites represent identity, it seems possible to find an interreligious dialogue only by looking beyond specific rites.⁶⁰

From a methodological approach that considers the identity as a dynamic of conflicts, it becomes evident how identity is a result of continuous cross-fertilizations, both in practices and in texts. Rites, as paradigms of the passage from ritual coherence to textual coherence,⁶¹ become therefore the expression of the process of collective identity's consolidation, and at the same time, rites represent the main sign of a system, religio, which transforms itself in the course of time.⁶² Dialogue between different confessions was therefore an urgent and topical matter on which authors debated, putting forward

⁵⁸ Jan Assmann, (1997), 72.

⁵⁹ Michel Foucault (1971).

⁶⁰ F. Facchini (1993).

⁶¹ Assmann, (1997)

⁶² Clifford Geertz (1973).



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philosophical, theological, and political arguments. Furthermore, the medieval genre of “dialogue” was constructed through paraphrases, quotations that quite frequently were left implicit, and a range of textual “misinterpretations” which often depended on scarcely reliable sources and inaccurate translations of original texts.

Based on textual comparison, it is possible to start weaving an intercultural and interreligious dialogue, since the works of Nicholas of Cusa, Abelard and Lewi were constructed through a continuous comparison of the essential texts and themes of the three monotheistic religions, Hebraism, Christianity and Islam.

Therefore, the influences and the transformations of religious and cultural tradition merge through the exegesis and study of the works of the past, and this study seems the only chance to have an authentic dialogue between different religions, in light of the several exchanges of which knowledge is formed.

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