



Interreligious studies, a cradle of dialogue

Interview with **Prof. Ambrogio Bongiovanni**

Director of the Gregorian Centre for Interreligious Studies

The Centre for Interreligious Studies can be compared to an antenna for the University, still small, but capable of detecting important external signs. The newly appointed Director explains the significance of “interreligious studies”, its importance in various contexts, and the disciplines involved in the pedagogy of dialogue. And its Golden Rule

by PAOLO PEGORARO

“People involved in interfaith dialogue are occasionally perceived as somewhat naïve. In reality, those working in this field are expected to be fully knowledgeable of its problems, tensions and diversities. When you master the skill of dealing with and navigating across differences, then something truly important can be achieved”, says Professor Ambrogio Bongiovanni, newly appointed Director of the Centre for Interreligious Studies at the Gregoriana, and extraordinary Professor at the Faculty of Missiology. Bongiovanni has three decades of experience in India, working in the area of cooperation. He also serves as President of the MAGIS Foundation, a missionary work of the Euro-Mediterranean Province of the Society of Jesus.”

❖ **Professor, what is the state of health of interreligious dialogue?**

“Even when it seemed that dialogue was heading for a standstill, or that certain factors were hindering the process, such as fundamentalism - be it political, reli-

Extensive experience on the ground

Ambrogio Bongiovanni has been actively engaged in the area of interfaith dialogue and of missionary and international cooperation since his university years, crossing paths with the United Nations. He has pursued his social and ecclesial commitment in the Indian and South Asian contexts. "I am very grateful to those realities," he says, "because they opened me up to new horizons and to a new way of understanding the world we live in, enriching my Christian faith and allowing me to move beyond a Euro-centric vision and be introduced to problematic issues, cultural horizons and languages that are very different from those characterising Western societies."

His ecclesial commitment has recently brought him to chair the Magis Foundation, tackling projects in areas ranging from human rights, education and justice in various parts of the world. He gained valuable experience in this field as a member of the Italian Bishops' Committee for Charitable Action where he served as an expert for twelve years.

His experience in India, however, remains unique, he says. "I witnessed the great transformation of this country

that started in 1990. It went from having an autarchic condition to adopting a more global, market-oriented approach. India today is one of the world's most industrialised and powerful countries, with one of the largest economies in the world.

It is a country that can make a great contribution to the international community and to the Church as a whole, but at the same time it faces some major challenges: demographic growth - its population has nearly doubled since 1990, reaching around 1.4 billion - extreme poverty, socio-political tensions, clashes among religious and among ethnic communities. In spite of this huge complexity, it is a great democracy with an extraordinary cultural richness: I believe this is ultimately the country's strength and what makes it unique."



gious or secular - the culture of dialogue continued to grow and develop. And Church Magisterium documents that have given renewed impetus to dialogue were made possible because Pope Francis recognised the fertile grounds that had been preserved and the seeds of dialogue scattered in various contexts, which needed to be nurtured, strengthened and allowed to germinate."

Indeed, many processes were revived at the institutional level. At the same time, however, there is a feeling that something is missing....

"That is because the culture of dialogue should be promoted also at grassroots level. This does not mean downgrading the content or quality of the dialogue, but rather ensuring that it is individually experienced at all levels. Educational opportunities and meaningful encounters are needed to ensure that this different approach to the complexity

of human reality becomes part and parcel of culture and living in our globalised world. I would have some doubts if the dialogue were carried out only at the institutional level, because institutions may occasionally have multiple goals, which ultimately amount to putting up a facade restricted to

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the diplomacy of reciprocity. But I am optimistic because I see so much goodwill, commitment and sacrifice in the pursuit of

Opposite page:
Visit to the Gregoriana of a delegation of Thai monks (Mahayana Buddhists), led by Mgr Francis Xavier Vira Arpondrattana and by Pra Archaryacheen Gananatichienbrot (Ven. Yen ngee) on 16 June 2022

Photo P. PEGORARO

dialogue, despite threats and setbacks. There are martyrs of dialogue. Charles de Foucauld or the monks of Tibhirine followed the law of love right to the very end. Indeed, the law of love overturns calculations and the principle of reciprocity, for it opens us up to a different perspective. For this reason, the Golden Rule of dialogue can be nothing other than the primacy of love.”



Prof. Ambrogio Bongiovanni together with Dr Muhammad Hasan Abdulghaffaar, former representative of Al-Azhar and Egypt as Imam of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Italy (Grand Mosque of Rome). Imam Hasan is also student at the Gregorian Centre for Interreligious Studies.

❖ **Where does the Centre for Interreligious Studies stand in this context?**

“I believe that the Centre can be compared to an antenna which receives and sends out messages. Our reality is still small, when compared to other consolidated academic centres, yet it has great potential. Admittedly, the structure as well as student numbers are important data for an academic unit, but our dynamism, flexibility, along with the possibility of offering non-structured areas of learning are equally important. The fact that personalities from the diplomatic world, perhaps operating in non-Christian contexts, turn to us is a significant sign.”

❖ **The Centre offers its expertise not only to the outside world, but also to other academic units of the Gregoriana. How does this type of academic unit interplay with other disciplines, interact with them, challenge them and enrich them?**

“Interreligious studies are not only about studying from an exclusively theological perspective, they require greater inter-

and cross-disciplinary approaches. In fact, there is a tendency to adopt the historical approach alone when studying the development of religious traditions, failing to reflect on inter-religiousness and inter-religious dialogue, which encompass all the categories of the human sciences. Interreligious studies are cradles of dialogue, whose concrete implementation requires the acquisition of tools, skills and knowledge. Dialogue cannot be only intellectual, for it is a living process, and it cannot be separated from life.”

❖ **So, what is the specific trait of the Centre, which qualifies precisely as a ‘Centre for Interreligious Studies’?**

“I will give an example. The Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI), with which we collaborate, already offers courses in the area of Islamic studies or Arabic language; what we are offering is the study of Christian-Muslim relations and their contemporary perspective. These areas of knowledge are complementary, implying shared competences, yet with different roles

“Bringing the culture of dialogue more and more to a basic level does not mean downgrading the content or quality of the dialogue, but rather ensuring that it is individually experienced at all levels. I would have some doubts if the dialogue were carried out only at the institutional level”

and perspectives. I firmly believe in this line of work, precisely because my area of expertise has been dialogue formation, the pedagogy of dialogue, studying the categories involved in the dialogue process.”

❖ **The Centre operates in close cooperation with the Faculty of Missiology, enhancing the “contextual perspective.” Can you tell us more about this?**

“Every religious experience develops within a specific context and interacts with its inherent cultural aspects, which possess a

transformative power. Therefore, religious traditions, including Christian traditions, must be contextualised. In the Indian context, in which I have lived, Catholic communities follow three different Rites - the Latin,

“The martyrs of dialogue - Charles de Foucauld or the monks of Tibhirine – teach us that the Golden Rule of dialogue can be nothing other than the primacy of love ”

the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara rites - with as many distinct religious sensitivities.

We may assume that we can understand a single religion by categorisation, considering only its generic aspects, but if we delve into the different contexts then it becomes more difficult. It is necessary to study not only the relations between different religious traditions, but also the ways in which they are manifested in different contexts - whether historical, geographical or cultural. The relationship between Christianity and Islam in Europe is different from the relationship between Christianity and Islam in South Asia, or Iran. Therefore, it is important to understand and operate within this interweaving of the cultural - in the broadest sense of the term - and the religious dimensions.

Our effort is to examine contexts from the perspective of communion and universality, to develop an understanding of contexts as forms of richness that form part of the Church's inculturation process, while simultaneously connecting each particular context to Church tradition and universality."

◀ In addition to the Diploma, over the years the Centre developed other areas of study, which form an integral part of the academic path. These include two in particular: the Interfaith Forums and the Intensive Study Sessions. Will the Weekly Forums be given a new format in the 2022-2023 academic year?

"The weekly Forums are open to the public. These encounters are of a more cultural and in-depth character, frequently

with speakers from outside the Gregorian. They reflect the two lines of study of the Centre: Christianity-Islam and Christianity-Religions and Cultures of Asia. They have been quite successful and much appreciated, hence we decided that the time was ripe to promote them further. Starting next year, while remaining open to the public, the Forums will be incorporated into the Centre's Program of Studies with a timetable adjustment to ensure the participation of enrolled students. This will facilitate students' engagement with external perspectives and contexts. It will also pro-

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vide them with an opportunity for open dialogue and ensuing systematic reflections."

◀ And as regards the Intensive Sessions...?

"The Sessions are seminars focused on specific topics, in collaboration with other internal and external academic institutions, likewise open to both external participants and students of the Gregoriana. Two Sessions were held this year, in accordance with the Centre's two areas of study.

The session on *The Qur'an in Rome* was co-organised with the University of Naples "L'Orientale", with *The European Qur'an* (EuQu) research project, in conjunction with PISAI and several young researchers.

The second Session has been taking place at the Camaldoli Monastery, in the days closest to Pentecost, focusing on dialogue with Hinduism and Hindu spirituality. *Towards Oneness. The Spirituality of Dialogue in Hinduism*, was the theme of this year's event. ▶