

**Hans Köchler**  
Professor of Philosophy, University of Innsbruck, Austria  
Co-President, International Academy of Philosophy

<p><b>Unity in Diversity</b> <b>Philosophy and the Meaning of Dialogue between Religions</b></p>
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*Keynote Lecture*

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## (I)

Never before in the history of mankind has there existed a situation where a multitude of civilizations and religions has coexisted – or has had to live together – in a more direct and immediate form than in our era of globalization. This constellation may be characterized as a “simultaneity” of different metaphysical conceptions and their related value systems under the conditions of a “life-world” that is determined by technology and its most salient feature at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the digital information and communication techniques. In earlier eras, a community could retreat into its own “domain” and shield itself from outside influences. This option, not to interact, is not anymore available.

Through recorded history, religious differences have all too often been causes of conflict between communities of believers and/or the political entities (states) in which they were organized. People have eagerly tried, and invested a lot of intellectual and emotional energy, to define the differences that distinguish them from others in order to shape and assert their cultural and religious identity. Drawing the borderlines between “us” and “them” – the dialectics of cultural self-assertion – has been part and parcel of identity politics from antiquity until the present day (to the point that even *within* communities, sub-groups have zealously striven to distinguish themselves from one another). Inter- and intra-religious conflicts, albeit often fuelled by socio-economic interests, constitute an important share of the history of civilizations. Since Samuel Huntington introduced the assumption of an incompatibility between different religious worldviews after the supposed end of ideological rivalry in the 1990s, the paradigm of the “clash of civilizations”<sup>1</sup> has indeed become a buzzword in contemporary discourses on world order, and in the debates that emphasize the cultural heritage of the Western world vis-à-vis other traditions in particular.

The simultaneity of distinct civilizational and religious life-worlds and value systems under the conditions of our “global village” – which, for each and every community, means proximity and interdependence to an ever higher degree – has given new and increasing relevance to the philosophy of religion, well beyond the traditional epistemological and metaphysical domains. In the context of globalization, the plurality of religious faiths has become a fact that determines every-day life also in the increasingly multicultural societies of the industrialized world; it has indeed become an inescapable social reality. To “manage” cultural and religious differences in a rational manner (in the true sense of what the Greeks called λόγος) is now an imperative of peace, at the local as well as at the global level.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion was first introduced by Bernard Lewis into contemporary discourse. See his “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” in: *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 266, No. 3 (September 1990), pp. 47–60.

Acknowledging a plurality of religions – i. e. a multitude of belief systems and their related ontological and normative concepts, as well as analyzing their structural content, does in no way imply a defense of *relativism*. A clear distinction has to be made between a relativist position (which claims the existence of a multitude of mutually exclusive truths, or entirely rejects the very notion of truth) and that of *perspectivism* in the Kantian sense. (It is to be noted that Kant's transcendental epistemology strictly distinguishes between phenomenon and reality as such [*Ding an sich*] and that his critique of the "Gottesbeweise," the classical philosophical arguments for the existence of God, only relates to the phenomenal [empirical] realm, but does not exclude another, genuine, access to the awareness of the νοούμενον, the transcendent and absolute Being, in the domain of *morality*). Religious pluralism is also not to be confused either with a *reductionist* approach that derives religious dogma from historical or socio-cultural factors, subordinating it to the empirical realm, or with forms of religious syncretism.

To describe the compatibility of a plurality of faiths with the universality of truth one might also refer to John Hick's cosmological metaphor that juxtaposes the Copernican versus the Ptolemaic model: while the latter is compared with a theological view that asserts the exclusive position of one particular religion, to the detriment of all other religions, the former symbolizes the fact that all theistic belief systems actually reveal different aspects of one and the same reality of the true God, merely taking different paths to achieve the same goal (in a way that is similar to the planets' revolving around the same star – which keeps them in their unique place, but along different trajectories).<sup>2</sup> Others have demonstrated, in the context of the Islamic tradition, that pluralism of religions, properly understood, does neither imply relativism nor undermine a particular religious identity. This is obvious in the notions of "non-reductive religious pluralism"<sup>3</sup> or of "pluralistic religion" in the sense of a "pluralism in truthfulness," which preserves the "ultimate uniqueness" of religion.<sup>4</sup> One could also illustrate this aspect of "unity in diversity" by reference to a frequently quoted dictum from a story of Jalaluddin Rumi ("Moses and the Shepherd") where God reminds Moses of the respect for the variety of individual religious experience and that experience's expression in a person's life-world and language: "I have given to every person a (particular) nature and temperament, (and) I have given to every person a

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<sup>2</sup> John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*. Oxford: One World Publications, 1973. See also his book *More than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Muhammad Legenhausen, *A Muslim's Proposal: Non-Reductive Religious Pluralism*. Online paper, 25 January 2006, at <http://www.uibk.ac.at/theol/leseraum/texte/626.html>. See also his work *Islam and Religious Pluralism*. London: Al-Hoda, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Seyed Hassan Hosseini, "Religious Pluralism and Pluralistic Religion: John Hick's Epistemological Foundation of Religious Pluralism and an Explanation of Islamic Epistemology toward Diversity of Unique Religion," in: *The Pluralist*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 2010), pp. 94-109.

(particular) form of speech and idiomatic expression. (...) We do not regard the tongue and (outward) speech, (but) We regard the soul and the (inward) state.”<sup>5</sup>

It is certainly legitimate to describe the actual multitude of belief systems empirically and in their sociological, psychological and historical dimensions, but only a deeper phenomenological approach will help us to understand the religious experience as a comprehension of the world *sui generis*, and to grasp its inherent metaphysical truth – in a manner that allows us to reach a deeper understanding of ourselves in the context of the κόσμος. *Theologia naturalis* – “natural theology” in the sense of the philosophical question as to the existence of God and his nature and attributes – has been an essential part of metaphysics (namely of *metaphysica specialis*) since ancient times. The philosophical analysis of the ontological issues that relate to the question of the transcendent and the absolute, in fact of the characteristics of Being as such, has been an intrinsic part of *philosophia perennis*, and in different religious contexts such as those of Islam and Christianity. The classical Aristotelian notion of the supreme being as the πρῶτον κινουῦν ἀκίνητον (“the first unmoved mover”) has informed metaphysical thinking in different religions and civilizational contexts.

General ontological concepts – that transcend cultural differences – allow the philosopher to undertake a *structural comparison* between distinct systems of faith and their metaphysical notions, and, subsequently, help the believer to better define, and defend, his own position. In that regard, the ontology of Mulla Sadra, his notion of “being” in distinction from “essence,” and his understanding of God in the sense of “unity and simplicity in the realm of Being,” as described in Muhammad Kamal’s interpretation,<sup>6</sup> is of particular interest to the philosopher of religion, and especially to those who seek a more comprehensive understanding of the connection between the fundamental question of ontology and the supreme truth of monotheistic religion.

A *logical* point could also be made in this *ontological* context, namely in regard to the ultimate truth that is expressed in and conveyed though the three monotheistic religions: if there exists only one god, that God must be one and the same. There cannot be three different “gods” for Jews, Christians and Muslims – only three different *perceptions* of God or *manifestations* of truth in the context of the respective revelation.<sup>7</sup> Awareness of this logically obvious, but nonetheless often neglected, truth could be an important contribution also to religious, or societal, peace in a wider sense. It is in this context that the late Cardinal Franz König, Archbishop of Vienna, emphasized that “particularly today a

<sup>5</sup> “Moses and the Shepherd” (part two), *Mathnawi II: 1750-1764*; “The reprimanding by God Most High of Moses – peace be upon him – for the shepherd’s sake.” Trans. from the Persian by Ibrahim Gamard, at <http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/n.a-II-1750.html>, accessed on 21 Dec. 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Kamal, *Mulla Sadra’s Transcendent Philosophy*. (Ashgate World Philosophies Series.) Aldershot (UK) / Burlington (USA): Ashgate, 2006, p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> On the notion of “God” see also Narjes Javandel Soumeahsaraei, “On Believing in the Same God: A Semantic Analysis,” in: Christian Kanzian and Muhammad Legenhausen (eds.), *Proofs for the Existence of God: Contexts – Structures – Relevance*. Innsbruck: IUP – Innsbruck University Press, 2008, pp. 113-126.

discussion between Islam and Christianity on monotheism has a beneficial function and should contribute towards the reduction of suspicion, towards the understanding of the peoples of the world and the peaceful coexistence of nations.”<sup>8</sup>

It is in the analysis of the different traditions and distinct perceptions of being where *hermeneutics* comes into play, a discipline that anyway has its origin in the interpretation of the sacred scriptures, including scriptural exegesis in Islam, long before it was identified as a special discipline in Friedrich Schleiermacher’s philosophy of religion. In different cultural contexts and life-worlds, philosophers have described the religious perceptions and interpretations of the world, and the truth contained in them, in the general conceptual framework of *metaphysics* and in particular of *ontology* as part of *metaphysica generalis*. They have also undertaken a structural analysis and comparison of different systems of faith. In this sense, philosophical reflection may provide a kind of “fundamental hermeneutics” of religious experience, which, in turn, is an essential precondition for, or element of, dialogue between distinct traditions. This will potentially assist the believer in achieving a deeper understanding of his own religious identity, a point I have made – if I may be allowed to reminisce for a moment – at the first international conference on “The Concept of Monotheism in Islam and Christianity,” which I organized in Rome back in 1981. I had then characterized the aim of this undertaking – namely an analysis of the central metaphysical notion of these two religions – as to “deepen one’s own self-comprehension through the encounter with and the respect for other religious and cultural traditions.”<sup>9</sup>

To elucidate the importance of philosophical hermeneutics for a better understanding of the religious message, and the eternal truth contained in it, we also may refer here to the view of Rudolf Bultmann, one of the leading Christian theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for whom the religious message needed to be *interpreted* in the conceptual framework of those who actually listen to it and aim to abide by its imperatives. His description could be seen as a kind of modern “mission statement” for the philosophy of religion that gives a new, and positive, meaning to the medieval characterization of philosophy as *ancilla theologiae* (that had effectively relegated philosophy to an auxiliary discipline and subordinated it to the authority of the Christian Church): “Theology has no more urgent task than that of learning the basic philosophy of its time, for it is this philosophy which has the critical task of analysis and conceptual translation (...) Philosophy performs for theology its old service as the ‘handmaid of theology.’”<sup>10</sup> In regard to the interpretation of the eternal message of his own Christian faith, Bultmann emphasized that “Christian history is filled with examples of transient cultural symbols used to utter

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<sup>8</sup> Hans Köchler (ed.), *The Concept of Monotheism in Islam and Christianity*. Vienna: Braumüller, 1982, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, “Vom Begriff der religiösen Gemeinschaft: Zu Ernst Lohmeyers gleichnamigem Buch,” in: *Theologische Blätter*, Vol. 6 (1927), col. 73. (Trans. From German by Joseph P. Cahill.)

Christian self-understanding.”<sup>11</sup> One could also refer here to Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy and his analysis of the “religious symbol.”<sup>12</sup>

## (II)

It is, thus, incumbent upon us to reflect on the possibility and role of a “philosophy of religion” under the conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In his lecture course of 1921/1922 on *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens* (Phenomenology of religious life), Martin Heidegger said: “Genuine philosophy of religion does not emerge from preconceived notions of philosophy and religion. Rather a specific religiosity (...) provides the possibility for its philosophical comprehension.”<sup>13</sup> This essentially phenomenological approach means that it is not mere abstract speculation, but authentic religious experience, in a given historical and socio-cultural context, which provides the foundation of philosophy of religion. “History can only be conceived on the basis of the present situation,” Heidegger continues, “and only in this way can the possibility of a philosophy of religion be grasped.”<sup>14</sup> From the outset, this implies a multitude of points of departure for the philosophical reflection on religion, and it excludes a narrow Eurocentric approach.

It is obvious, but must be stressed nonetheless, that “philosophy of religion” is not identical with “religious philosophy.” The philosophical approach *per se* is neutral vis-à-vis a particular faith; it embodies the universality of the mind – *without prejudice* to the individual religious commitment of the philosopher. A widely used term such as “Christian philosophy,” to give just one example that illustrates this semantical issue, only relates to the philosophical ideas developed by thinkers who, as individuals, belong to the Christian faith; it does not mean that the specific notions or theories expounded by them *as such* are “Christian.”<sup>15</sup> No one can claim the λόγος (reason or, in a modern context, rationality) as a privilege of his religion, thus excluding believers of other faiths from the “community of communication” (*Kommunikationsgemeinschaft* in the sense of Habermas) and denying them the status of equal partners in philosophical dialogue about metaphysical truth. This is the point where I beg to differ with the famous Regensburg lecture of September 2006 entitled “Faith, Reason

<sup>11</sup> Review of Hans Lietzmann, “Geschichte der alten Kirche,” in: *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, Vol. 58 (1939), p. 262. See also Rudolf Bultmann, “Zur Frage der Christologie,” in: *Glauben und Verstehen. (Gesammelte Aufsätze, Vol. 1.)* Tübingen: Mohr, 1933, pp. 85-113.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*. New York: Harper & Row, 1967, pp. 15ff.

<sup>13</sup> “Die echte Religionsphilosophie entspringt nicht vorgefaßten Begriffen von Philosophie und Religion. Sondern aus einer bestimmten Religiosität (...) ergibt sich die Möglichkeit ihrer philosophischen Erfassung.” (Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*. Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 60. Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995, p. 124.)

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>15</sup> On this see also Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 3rd ed. 1966, p. 6.

and the University” that was characterized by an apologetic approach along those lines.<sup>16</sup> Any *exclusivist* approach is intrinsically alien to the *philosophical* mind and undertaking – in whichever historical or socio-cultural environment. In structural terms, this also applies to the kind of “inclusivism,” namely his notion of the “anonymous Christian,” by which the late Karl Rahner – whom I had invited to Innsbruck in November 1970 for a lecture on “Theology in Interdisciplinary Dialogue” – had tried to grasp the intricacies of inter-religious relations in the era of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>17</sup> It was certainly not an easy task to reconcile Catholic self-comprehension as expressed in the dictum *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (“outside the Church there is no salvation”) with the requirements of intra-religious (i.e. inter-Christian) dialogue at the time, not to speak of relations with non-Christian religions.

Endowed with the capacity of self-reflection, the human being has always striven for the ultimate truth and meaning of life. The search for the transcendent has united thinkers of all civilizations throughout the ages. This genuinely *philosophical* quest is based on experience and reason in a comprehensive sense (and not only in the meaning of European Enlightenment). Through its universal outlook, and transcending cultural differences, philosophy has indeed created a *common space* of reflection on the existence of the absolute. This is the *essence* and *basis* of the mission of philosophy of religion also in the present age – in spite of all the challenges posed by the exclusivist and exclusionary as well as the relativist paradigms, or the relegation of religious experience to the psychological and sociological domains.

It is here where the question of the specific meaning of *dialogue* between different religions, and the civilizations associated with them, comes into play. We cannot avoid posing the one fundamental question: In what sense may one speak of “dialogue” if one bears in mind that each religion represents the *ultimate* truth in the form that is *unique* to its socio-cultural environment and the circumstances of its revelation? In view of this uniqueness, one may conceptually distinguish between co-existence, implying mutual respect, between different religions with their specific manifestations of truth on the one hand, and dialogue among those who analyze the underlying metaphysical notions on the other. “Dialogue” is thus the appropriate category for the efforts of those who engage in the *philosophy of religion*, who analyze the distinct forms of revelation of the absolute, and its categorizations, and who undertake to relate the basic elements of each system of faith to the other. Hermeneutical analysis and structural comparison between ontological concepts is the field where a dialogical approach – in clear distinction from an apologetic one – is conceptually appropriate and theologically legitimate.

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<sup>16</sup> Hans Köchler, “Religion, Reason and Violence: Pope Benedict XVI and Islam,” in: *Future Islam*, New Delhi, September/October 2006, [www.futureislam.com](http://www.futureislam.com).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. K. Riesenhuber, “Der anonyme Christ nach Karl Rahner,” in: *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, Vol. 86 (1964), pp. 286-303.

I would like to conclude by referring again to the anthropological constant that is at the roots of religion as well as philosophy: The quest of the *absolute* is an intrinsic characteristic of man. While, in the religious domain, this effort is pursued on the basis of revelation and faith, the philosophical method is solely dependent on (human) reason. These two distinct approaches are not contradictory, but complementary. Without imposing itself on the original domain of faith, philosophy – through an analysis of the *common structure* of religious experience – may assist the believer to overcome a merely apologetic approach, and to reach out to the truth revealed in other religions.

*Dialogue between religions* – or, more specifically, between those who undertake a philosophical analysis of religion – may, thus, contribute to a deeper awareness of the common foundation of our life-world and can give metaphysical depth to today’s technological civilization that, in its globalized version, risks to forget its metaphysical roots. Philosophy of religion may help us to become aware that rational analysis of being is not the privileged domain of a particular civilization, rooted in a specific religious worldview, but the common heritage of man on the basis of which we can better understand and appreciate each other’s religious identity. This is the spirit of “unity in diversity” that can be seen as the quintessential element of “global religion” in our time; and therein lies the essentially *dialogical nature* of the philosophy of religion. Under these circumstances, philosophy can indeed make a tangible contribution to peaceful co-existence among religions – as cornerstone of a sustainable order of peace and justice among nations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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