

Plenary Session

MONDAY, JUNE 25, 2018 (DANUBIUS HOTEL FLAMENCO - AUDITORIUM)

How can I find God in the “Other”? Towards Responsible Religious Belonging

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Me, God and the Other: what kind of relationship?

When I was given the title of the plenary I was attracted by its second part: “**Towards a responsible religious belonging**”. What does it mean to have a responsible religious belonging?

The word “responsible” is a word applicable to many different contexts and users: its meaning depends on who is using it and what is his/her goal.

The Cambridge Dictionary says that someone “responsible” is someone “having good judgment and the ability to act correctly and make decisions on your own.”¹ “**To be responsible for**” means “to have control and authority over something or someone and the duty of taking care of it, him, or her.”² This did not help me understand what we actually look for when we talk about “responsible religious belonging” and what is the relation between such an attitude and an interreligious way of looking at the world.

I thought that maybe answering to the first question of the plenary might have helped having a clearer idea of what is the direction suggested by the organizers for this discussion.

First of all, when in front of the question “How can I find God in the other?” one should ask: **who is this Other we are talking about?**

To discuss this, allow me to use a non-theological context and platform: Facebook. On Facebook we do have “friends” with whom we interact, who – most of the time or for the majority - think like we think (at least about the few topics we write about on Facebook), who like us, comment on our posts and re-tweet us. Suddenly the Other becomes the person I disagree with or with whom I do not have interests in common. You may be familiar with strategies of some social media which might stop showing you posts of people you never click on or react to because they consider you are not interested in what this “friend” has to say and the social network does not want to annoy you and maybe lose you. Therefore it decides not to show you anymore what this person posts and does. He/she disappears...

The Other then becomes someone who thinks differently, the person I don’t see anymore.

Going back to non-virtual life, very often my Other is a person from another community – social, cultural or religious one – and I maybe learn about him/her on TV news or during talk shows but in many cases I

¹ Accessed at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/responsible>.

² Accessed at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/responsible>.

might not even have a first-hand experience. In such a situation it really becomes difficult to find God in him/her.

A first answer to the main question this plenary is addressing then is: I meet God in the Other when I allow this person not to disappear from my life, when I don't "silence" him/her.

We started with social media but I would like now to **move to Scriptures**. The way our question is asked, presumes that we **believe in God's presence in this other person**. In the Gospel according to Matthew there are some figures who may provide us food for thought in this framework: the Wise Men.

For those who are not familiar with this story, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, some Wise Men or Magi came to Jerusalem from the East and asked Herod where the newborn King of the Jews was. They also explain: "For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage" (Matthew 2:2).³ Herod directs them to Bethlehem and we read:

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road (Matthew 2:9-12).

These Wise Men are clearly not part of the people of Israel, they come from another cultural and religious tradition.⁴ Notwithstanding, they are the first ones in the Gospel to receive somehow news of Jesus' birth. What is most interesting is that they receive this "revelation" through a sign in nature, through what arguably was their way of interacting with the divine: looking at stars.⁵ It is the star guiding them, it is when they see the star that we read "they were overwhelmed with joy" (Matthew 2:10). This star is a providential guide, a "sign of the Presence",⁶ it opens a channel of communication between them and God and they make the choice of following it. The pericope ends with a more common way in the Bible for God to speak: a dream. God continues to communicate with the Wise Men in the way God has made his message reach Joseph in the previous chapter of the Gospel and in the way he interacted with Jacob in the book of Genesis.

The Wise Men are just but an example of how Scriptures do not block God's communication to the "Other". Until today, these figures made their way – at least in Italy – into the homes of many people where usually we have the nativity scene in Advent and Christmas time. However we rarely think about this aspect of the story, about the unconventionality of the revelation they received, about the way God communicates with them in the way they can "hear" Him.

This idea has been translated in different ways within the Catholic Church throughout the centuries.

In 1979 John Paul II stated that the "Spirit of truth" operates "outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body".⁷ In 1990 in the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, he clearly stated the Church's point of view on this subject: "The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time. The Second

³ Quotations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition.

⁴ R. BROWN, *La nascita del Messia secondo Matteo e Luca*, 214; U. LUZ, *Vangelo di Matteo*, I, 193.

⁵ J. RADERMAKERS, *Lettura pastorale del Vangelo di Matteo*, 115.

⁶ S. FAUSTI, *Una comunità legge il Vangelo di Matteo*, I, 27.

⁷ GIOVANNI PAOLO II, *Redemptor Hominis*, n°6.

Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the 'seeds of the Word,' to be found in human initiatives-including religious ones-and in mankind's efforts to attain truth, goodness and God himself."⁸

The idea that the Spirit operates outside the visible borders of the Church has its roots not only in the Second Vatican Council but much earlier. For example, Justin Martyr, in the II century, stated that the Logos is universally present and that the seeds of the Word are present in every person.⁹

There is a third and final point I want to discuss with you about this question. **To ask how I can find God in the Other implies that I believe that somehow God may talk to me, become present to me through him/her.** It is not only a question of looking for God in the other person for a scientific reason or out of curiosity. It is the desire one has of meeting God that drives one to look for God in the other person. When God is found, life changes.

In the field of dialogue we often talk about the willingness of leaving doors open to the possibility of changing through the encounter with the other because I listen to him/her. Thanks to a new relationship I establish with the other person, new ideas come to my mind and I may start seeing things from a different perspective. But there is also another level to be added to this reflection: my life may change as a result of meeting the other because of what God operates in me through this other human being.

To end this short reflection I just wanted to share a couple of experiences of dialogue highlighting this aspect.

I have been practicing **Scriptural Reasoning** for about a decade right now and I am always impressed by the fact that when you sit at the table with people from other religious traditions and discuss Sacred Texts you know you are in the presence of people who are striving to have a relationship with God in their lives. You look at the other people around the table and you know that all are believers, each person walking in the hope of getting closer to God. This personal effort brings a light on the time spent together. One usually ends the Scriptural Reasoning session with new insights from the life of the other people in the room and very often with a fresh look on the Scripture of his/her own faith tradition.

Another experience that allowed me to see how God may become present to me through the presence of others is the one I have in **my church back in Rome**. The church is run by a religious family whose charisma is to work with youth, most especially with the poorest young people.¹⁰ Some years ago, reflecting on who are today the poorest young people in our society, the answer the parish leadership gave was the young refugees. We started then a project to support their integration through socialization. Apart from some basic services we started to offer, like the Italian language course, the idea was to offer space, time and activities for the young Italians to meet with and spend time with young refugees. In this framework we also started to run interreligious meetings. I still remember when, during one of the first meetings, a young refugee shared in a small group his experience of prayer. While the Italians in the group shared the challenge they face to find half an hour to pray during the day, a refugee told us about the days he was in the desert in a truck with other dozens of people. Days during which some of them died and were left there in the desert, days during which he decided to offer his life

⁸ GIOVANNI PAOLO II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n°28.

⁹ "[S]eed of reason [the Logos] implanted in every race of men". JUSTIN MARTYR, *Second Apology*, chapter 8, accessed at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0127.htm>.

¹⁰ E. DINI, "Interreligious dialogue and integration", accessed at <http://www.europe-infos.eu/interreligious-dialogue-and-integration>.

to God, to trust Him, to be sure that whatever his destiny would have been – to live or to die – God was with him.

Sometimes when we hear these stories it is difficult, even if we have in front of us the other person, to understand that it is not a movie, it is a person's story and there is a blessing in receiving it. God makes Himself present through the testimony and life of those around us and it is moving to see how the life of many young Italians and refugees changed as a result of meeting each other throughout the past years.

Coming to a conclusion, I want to go back to the first question about what it means to go towards a responsible religious belonging. I think that **responsible religious belonging should be considered at least under four aspects**. One is called to be responsible in his/her religious belonging first of all in front of God. This could mean to be ready to recognize His voice or His action in the life of the Other and not to close the door to what one perceives as unconventional. God is always "unconventional".

One is also called to a responsible religious belonging in front of society, reminding everyone of the value of each person, and in front of one's own community, showing that God is larger than just "us". Finally, one is responsible in his/her religious belonging in front of the Other: as God may become present to us through the Other, God could also become present through us when we allow Him to use us as an instrument of His love.