

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: POPE JOHN PAUL II AND YUNUS EMRE

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One of the important acts of the Second Vatican Council, convened by the late great Pope John XXIII "in order to bring the Catholic Church up to date," concerned Muslims and the Inter-religious Dialogue. For the first time the Church addressed thus the followers of Islam. In their *Nostra Aetate III* statement the Council members expressed their desire to move to a new era of co-operation with these words: "Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The Sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values."

The same Council in *Nostra Aetate I* on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions stated: "In this age of ours (*Nostra aetate*), when people are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different peoples are being strengthened, the Church examines with greater care the relation which she has to non-Christian religions. Ever aware of her duty to foster unity and charity among individuals and even among nations, she reflects at the outset on what tends to promote fellowship among them. All people form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to prepare the entire earth, and also because all share a common destiny, namely God."

This was of course a long awaited and expected gesture from the Christian Church and met with an immediate and general response from all concerned. For, in the Muslim world and no doubt also in other religious communities the same desire for dialogue and rapprochement already existed.

As far as we Turks are concerned, we believe we gave from the early twenties and into the thirties a unique example of such a frame of mind through the radical transformation of our society initiated by the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In his remarkably realistic vision, Atatürk updated our attitude towards religion on the basis of the tradition of tolerance of our forefathers, the Ottomans. Before succumbing to nationalism, they had for centuries succeeded in ensuring the conditions for the harmonious coexistence of different religious communities.

Atatürk's reforms and their impact were certainly a great leap forward and Pope John XXIII, who lived for many years among us as the beloved representative of the Vatican, personally witnessed this challenging transformation. The establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and the Vatican during his papacy was not a mere coincidence. We kept a precious souvenir of his years with us and we always discerned in his personality a human naturalness cherished deeply in our part of the world. He was certainly a man fit for inter-religious dialogue.

The Vatican, with its walls, palaces topped by Michelangelo's dome of Saint Peter's –built in the same era as the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne, another marvel of architecture created for the glory of God– is an impressive sight indeed. Saint Peter's Basilica is full of art, mainly sculptures, no doubt a vestige of the pagan tradition, but also a mark of a keen awareness of human creativity. It provides a contrast with Islamic art, which is based more on simplicity, abstract motifs and a marked sensitivity for colours, as is reflected in the names of famous mosques such as the Green Mosque in Bursa or the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. Differences as

well as similarities. The aim of the dialogue is thus obvious. It is to achieve a sense of togetherness by studying and discussing various subjects, not only of theological importance, but also of cultural, social and even political concern, in order to combat the insensitivities and prejudices which divided and, unfortunately, still divide peoples at the threshold of the Third Millennium.

Together with the worthy successors of Pope John XXIII, several initiatives were taken in order to realise concrete results in this respect and to find ways and means to include all sectors in the process of dialogue.

Within such a framework, in Turkey, in conformity with an academic agreement signed in 1988 between the University of Ankara and the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, the possibilities for an exchange of professors, students and publications were created and academic seminars jointly organized. The themes explored included the concept of tolerance in the Muslim and Christian traditions, the relationship between religion and culture, the role of education in forming the values of tolerance and acceptance, the way tolerance has been fostered historically in the two religious traditions and the necessity of tolerance amidst modern social change.

Furthermore in 1991, on the occasion of the Year of Yunus Emre declared by UNESCO, to commemorate the 750th anniversary of the birth of the great Turkish mystical poet, a seminar was held at the Pontifical Gregorian University on the poet's 'spiritual experience and culture.' Ankara State Opera and Ballet performed the Yunus Emre Oratorio by the Turkish composer the late Adnan Saygun in honour of Pope John Paul II in the courtyard of the Papal Palace in Castel Gandolfo. The following words of Pope John Paul II on this occasion translate most eloquently the meaning and value of the inter-religious process:

"Yunus Emre was filled with an awareness of the loving presence of God in the midst of creation. He sang of the universal brotherhood of all human beings and of the power of love to transform human life into a hymn of praise to God. He saw in the wonders of the natural world the signs which lead to an ever deeper knowledge of God and a desire to reverence and thank Him.

These themes have lost none of their importance today. In a society too often closed to life's transcendent dimension, we need to be reminded of God's loving presence and nearness. A world too often torn by strife is in need of devout believers who, by word and deed, encourage understanding and union among all the members of the human family. We need to learn anew a respectful attitude towards nature, and extend our commitment to use its benefits with care and responsibility. Christians find much in Yunus Emre's God-centered poems to remind them of their striking similarity with the spirituality of Saint Francis of Assisi.

The Oratorio has been a moment of profound encounter, of mutual understanding and friendship. May you continue to proclaim the glory of God through your artistry. May the thoughts and sentiments inspired by this performance accompany us all in our work for a better world and for peace among its inhabitants. May God bless you and reward you."

The inter-religious dialogue is of course still at its initial stage and has to be pursued with vigour and determination. Nevertheless, already one can safely say that its spirit has provided a new spark of hope in international relations in these days of globalization.

Here in Turkey we are ready to continue to expand and diversify this process, inspired as we are with the humanist and religious thought of the great Yunus Emre as translated in his eternal verses.