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POPE PAUL'S MAP OF THE CHURCH IN DIALOGUE:  
ARE WE STILL FOLLOWING IT?

Pope Paul VI, in what he referred to, without apparent irony, as «this simple, conversational letter of Ours» (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 6)<sup>1</sup>, realized that he might have appeared naïve and perhaps over-enthusiastic in his presentation of the role of the Church in the world<sup>2</sup>. Yet he denied the charge and maintained that he saw the situation very clearly, mapping the world as a series of concentric circles with the Church at the centre.

To see the Church at the centre of the map in this manner should not be thought of as arrogant pretension. To the contrary it was a humble attempt to envisage a Church that is not above, or marginal to or radically separated from the world. It is a Church immersed in the world, placed by God in the centre of a world that God loves in order to be the instrument through which God continues a millennia-long dialogue with human beings. Though immersed in the world, it tries not to lose sight of its particular role in this dialogue and so adopt the world's attitudes of despair, indifference or of self-satisfaction.

Nor is this "centre" the static position of those who have already arrived at their goal. The Pope repeatedly insists that the Church continues to be a pilgrim (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 37, 41, 117). The centrality, thus, is to be understood as a proximity to the whole of humanity and an availability for the dialogue which he sees as the very definition of the Church. This proximity in Pope Paul's mapping of the world varies according to the class of person we are considering, and he outlines three circles: those who believe in Christ but

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<sup>1</sup> Except where indicated otherwise, the paragraph numbering used in this paper refers to the English translation of the Encyclical, which for some reason varies from the Italian version.

<sup>2</sup> «You may say that in making this assertion we are carried away by an excessive zeal for Our office and are not giving sufficient weight to the true position of the Catholic Church vis-a-vis the world. But that is not so. We see the concrete situation very clearly, and might sum it up in general terms by describing it in a series of concentric circles around the central point at which God has placed us» (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 96).

do not belong visibly to the Catholic Church, those who believe in God but not in Christ, and those who do not believe in God. This paper examines the ways in which *Ecclesiam Suam's* mapping of the Church's world compares with the one we implicitly use today, and then goes on to ask whether we might return to his vision of a world in dialogue in order to address some of the issues we currently face.

In the 1960's when this encyclical was being written, the dialogue with those who did not believe seemed the most complex and distant, while that with other believers appeared more straightforward and so these latter warranted only a few short comments in the letter. Today the situation seems very different: since the fall of communism, dialogue with those who do not believe in God appears more straightforward, especially because we are inclined to think of ourselves as victors. On the other hand the dialogue both within the Church and with other believers – the two closest circles in Paul VI's map – has come to seem much more problematic.

One often hears talk of a crisis of belief even within the Church, and yet in many ways what we are facing is perhaps in great part a crisis of credibility. «La Chiesa si fa colloquio» (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 67 Italian trans.) wrote the pope in his native Italian: «The Church makes itself a conversation». The English translation is much weaker: the Church merely «has a communication to make» (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 65). Paul VI was convinced that there is a profound difference between the ministry of teaching and the job of simply telling. «The person who speaks is always at pains to learn the sensitivities of his audience», he tells us (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 81), and it is the constant effort of dialogue which makes teachers of us (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 83). It seems that many entrusted with the ministry of teaching have lost that infinite patience that Pope Paul tells us is required in a teacher (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 81, 104), and prefer dictat to dialogue. They repeat the same timeworn phrases that have left people puzzled and then they blame their listeners for not finding the words credible. They might rather reflect that, if their words were truly a participation in the dialogue of salvation that God has established with humanity, they would inevitably engage people.

Many people do not sense that their side of the dialogue is heard and responded to. They do not expect necessarily to be agreed with. They do, however, expect to be taken seriously. They hope that they will be believed when they express their reservations, and that there will result a genuine attempt to meet them where they are. As Pope Paul writes in a telling sentence, «before speaking, we must take great care to *listen* not only to what men say, but more especially to what they have it in their hearts to say». First listen, not only to the words, but more importantly to the heart. A teaching Church is first of all a listening Church. It will be a Church of those

who, since they desire to be pastors, fathers and teachers, will first of all make themselves brothers (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 87).

We witness in the Church today many teachers who insist that they must simply stand firm, hold the line, and repeat what they take to be the truth. They pride themselves on the fact that their words are rejected, taking this as a sure sign of their faithfulness. Furthermore they criticize sharply those who try to follow the lead given by Pope Paul VI in listening carefully as good teachers who must find out at what stage their pupils are before developing a plan for bringing them to the point they would like them to reach.

It is certainly the case that in the closest circle – that of our fellow Christians – the dialogue, though perhaps unevenly spread and at times fitful, has made and continues to make great advances. Yet at the level of the second circle – those who believe in God – things seem less positive. One wonders whether the second and third circles have not in fact been reversed, and so the members of the world's great religious traditions are seen as somehow more foreign to us than are those who find they cannot believe in God. Pope Paul saw these other believers as nearer to us precisely because of their belief, because of the way in which they are involved in the dialogue of salvation which God undertakes with all humanity (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 72). Yet one notices in recent years a marked tendency to distance oneself from other believers, because of a deep skepticism about the real openness of those who believe differently from ourselves. We find ourselves considering those who do not subscribe to any religion as being more likely to enter into dialogue, because they are not yet so firmly committed. We find the values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and secular human rights discourse in general more congenial than, for example, the theologically based discourse of Muslims in this area. We have a tendency to overlook the unresolved ambiguities inherent in human-rights talk, and speak as though it is simply and self-evidently consonant with a Christian worldview.

Religious traditions that have emerged in a different time period and another geographical area often pose less of a problem for Christians when it comes to dialogue precisely because they have not historically contested the same geographical and theological space. One notices among theologians of religion that their pluralist theologies are often implicitly based on a consideration of Asian religions. It becomes simple enough in these theologies to

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<sup>3</sup> Though in the encyclical Pope Paul did not elaborate much on the relationship with particular religions, he could be understood to imply that the followers of what he calls "the great Afro-Asiatic religions" are believers in God. It is difficult to know what precisely is covered by this category. The one major religion that covers Africa and Asia would be Islam, but that has already been mentioned separately. The other great religions of Asia – Buddhism and Hinduism – are present only minimally in Africa.

consider Asian religions alternative ways to the same goal because they have not traditionally offered an alternative reading of the same religious texts and events, in the way that Judaism and Islam have<sup>3</sup>.

Of course, the relationship of Christians with Jews is particular, partly because of the shared history of the two traditions. For Christians, Judaism is not simply one among the religions. However, we might want to ask ourselves whether the ease that western Christians and a still largely western Church leadership find in dealing with Jews could be more the result of a substantially shared culture rather than the fruit of theological conviction. The fact that the vast majority of the world's Jews live in the diaspora – principally in Europe and the United States – has resulted in the emergence of a strong sense of a common culture, even to the extent that Christians have a tendency to forget that only sixty years ago their centuries-long tradition of hatred of the Jews made possible the Shoah.

Perhaps, then, it is mainly in the case of Islam that our mental map of the world does not fit that of Paul VI. In our worldview Muslims seems to have been moved from the second circle – «not so far away from us» (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 107) as Pope Paul said – further toward the margins. In the mind of many, dialogue with Muslims is simply impossible, and the very presumption of that impossibility is taken to absolve us of any duty to pursue real dialogue. To be fair, it would be more precise to say that many people consider dialogue with Islam to be impossible, and in this they are in a sense correct – but only in the sense that, of course, systems do not dialogue. Only people do. Christianity cannot dialogue – only Christians can. Buddhism cannot dialogue – only Buddhists can.

This is one of the elements that has contributed to our redrawing of the mental map, and it may be a weakness in the mapping technique that Pope Paul used: we are subtly mapping our world according to groups rather than people. We need to put Islam somewhere in this map and so we instinctively position it as hostile, as over-against, because some Muslims make no secret of their hostility towards “the West” or Christianity, or modernity. We are offered every day a view of the world which is polarized between two increasingly hostile camps, a world locked in constant struggle. Such a view of the world prevents us from seeing the actual people in front of us and beside us who conform in varying degrees or even not at all to the stereotypes that guide us. We are so focused on Islam that we can no longer see the vast variety of individual Muslims who make up the community.

The other way in which this mental map skews our view of the world is that it renders us incapable of seeing clearly the phenomena that do not fit into its polarized scenario: the many, many children who die of hunger and common diseases every minute of each day; the nations crushed by indebtedness and corruption; the cultures brutalized by the globalization of greed.

An over-emphasis on our own vulnerability leads us to forget the truly vulnerable of our world.

One of the key insights, it seems to me, of *Ecclesiam Suam*, though it is not developed there at any great length, is the idea that the first step in any dialogue is to listen (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 87). The initiative which the Church is called to take in the dialogue (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 71, 72, 77), begins with the effort to listen attentively to the other. Those who lament the unpreparedness of Muslims to enter into dialogue often mean by that that the Muslims are not prepared to listen to them. Yet the proper question, according to Pope Paul's way of seeing things, is whether we are listening. Much of the world says to the West, «Because of the your dominance of global communications and the hegemony of your culture, we are listening to you night and day. Please, now it is our turn to speak and yours to listen to us». And this entails listening not just to what is said on the surface, but to what lies beneath it: «Then, before speaking, we must take great care to listen not only to what men say, but more especially to what they have it in their hearts to say. Only then will we understand them and respect them, and even, as far as possible, agree with them» (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 87).

The Pope seems to be presuming that what is said on the surface of the dialogue is not always what the person really has on her mind. Thus in order to listen attentively, we have to attune ourselves to the feelings and motivations behind the words. This an important element in interreligious dialogue of any kind, but I think especially so in the current situation of dialogue with Muslims. Although on the surface the discourse is religious, the emotions and motivations lying behind those words are generated by the poverty, the experience of exclusion, the sense of frustrated hope, and the simple humiliation which is the lot of so many Muslims, not particularly because they are Muslims, but because they live principally in the Third World. Even most of those who live in developed countries, particularly in Europe, live in many ways on the margins of society. If we are not attentive to this fact we will find it difficult to understand what is being said to us on the surface. We often imagine that Muslims speak and act as strongly and even violently as some of them do simply because they belong to the Islamic religion. Yet might it not be that the anger and the violence arise not from the what they *belong* to but from the what they *don't belong* to? As we have seen graphically illustrated here in Paris so recently, the despair born of systematic exclusion and constant marginalization gives rise to violence.

Indeed when Pope Paul speaks of the subjects for our dialogue, he implicitly recognizes that the issues we have to deal with are not principally religious: «We desire to join with them in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare, and civic order» (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 108). Our dialogue,

in order to be a cause of joy and an instrument of hope, must be able to address the sorrows and the anguish at the heart of our partner.

Returning to Paul VI's map of our world means recognizing as he did that Muslims and other believers are «not very far from us». This means taking the other seriously as a believer, that is, as someone who is listening seriously and sincerely for a word from God addressed to his or her life, not a new revelation or further prophecy but an insight into what God wills and where God is guiding me at any particular moment. Again here we find a widespread attitude that denies that a Muslim is able really to listen for a word from God because of his faith that the Qur'ân *is* that Word, is all that there is to that Word. Such an attitude tends to focus on some Muslims' discourse *about* the Qur'ân instead of seeing how it actually functions in the life of the believer. Muslims understand the relationship between the Qur'ân itself and the word that God is currently addressing to the believer in a way that is much more complex than they are often given credit for. The Qur'ân functions as a point of contact with the ongoing guidance of God. Its recitation does not substitute for that relationship of guidance, but rather anchors and maintains it. Muslim tradition has always been suspicious of the kind of interpretation which is merely an avoidance of the text's just demands – what we might call in English «interpreting something away» – or which is tendentious and creates division in the community (cf. Q 3:6). Yet at the same time the same tradition has devoted enormous energy to the work of discerning, on the basis of the Qur'ân and other sources, what God desires for us. Whatever of the rhetoric against “interpreting” the Qur'ân, the Muslim community has always been and continues to be a hermeneutical community.

Time does not permit a full examination of the advice Pope Paul gives us for the style of our dialogue, about the clarity that it requires and teaches, about the humility and meekness with which we must enter into it, about the peaceful and patient generosity needed to persevere in it, about the intimacy and friendship it engenders. However, the last word should be left to the author of *Ecclesiam Suam*, «this simple, conversational letter»; «Today, every day, should see a renewal of our dialogue. We, rather than those to whom it is directed, should take the initiative» (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 77).