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ON ECUMENISM AND THE PEACE OF RELIGIONS

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Abstract: The study aims at reconsidering the prerequisites and preconditions required in order to make interreligious communication possible. The issue is addressed within the broader framework of the debate surrounding ecumenism and “the peace of religions”, making explicit reference to the particular case of Central and Eastern Europe. Particular attention is given to describing and interpreting the current stage of religious cohabitation (touching on the situation of post-communist countries), and to predicting the possible directions in which this will evolve, as well as the potential mechanisms and triggers that might reconfigure the framework for discussion in the medium and long term.

The possibility of interreligious communication is reappraised and re-examined by analysing several key-concepts in the dynamic of their relation and by referring to particular contexts: religion and ideology, spiritual and political authority, religious and spiritual leadership, gaze and authenticity, political system and religious education, religious minority and religious majority, ecumenism and “the peace of religions”.

Key Words: religion, communication, ecumenism, *pax fidei*, authority, education, minority, Central and Eastern Europe

Introduction

The aim of the present study is to address a complex and, at the same time, delicate subject, whose ramifications will be analysed and re-examined by following several lines of research.¹

Put succinctly, the general subject matter is the prerequisites and preconditions required in order to make interreligious communication possible. The issue will be addressed within the broader framework of the debate surrounding ecumenism and “the peace of religions”², making explicit reference to the particular case of Central and Eastern Europe. Particular attention will be given to describing and interpreting the current stage of religious cohabitation, touching on the situation of post-communist countries, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to predicting, in a rather pragmatic manner, the possible directions in which this will evolve, as well as the potential mechanisms and triggers that might reconfigure the framework for discussion in the medium and long term.

The approach to the topic under examination is from a perspective pertaining mainly to the fields of the philosophy of religion and the history of religious ideas.

The chosen viewpoint brings together and integrates debates and issues relevant, on the one hand, to the historical developments of the various embodied “faces” of the religious, grasped in their political and communal aspects, and, on the other hand, to the reappraisal of meanings and interpretations, divested of diachrony and revealed in religious and/or theological discourse, with regard to “the peace of religions”³.

These two coexisting “viewpoints” naturally interweave the communal, institutionalised dimension of the understanding of religion, and the personal (and personalised) dimension of religious experience.

The political extent of interreligious dialogue, in its secular and institutionalised dimension, is emblematically reflected in the different usages of the term “ecumenism”, which posit communication at the level of individuals following different religious traditions, as well as at the level of the institutions meant to represent, traditionally or officially, coexisting religions, in a more or less politicised manner.

The non-secularised dimension of interreligious communication, envisaged as a non-politicised dialogue stemming from spiritual premises alone, will be further addressed drawing upon the suggestive formulation used by Nicolaus Cusanus: “the peace of religions”.

Thus, the present study intends to analyse the two aspects as they reflect each other, explicitly emphasising that their differentiation is purely methodological, and their edges of interference will be brought into close discussion.

Theology, ideology and interreligious communication

There are several terminological delimitations pertaining to the religious-political realm, denoting, by virtue of their common occurrences and implicit meanings, a belonging to structures, systems, and configurations of an institutional nature, and indicating, by their very definition, a specific type of relation established within the framework of different forms of communal organisation. Thus, terms or expressions such as “religious minority”, “denomination”, “canon”, “Church”, “sect”, “religious toleration”, “religious conflict”, “official/unofficial religion”, “ecumenism” etc., make sense only within the bounds of systems which, by their nature, presuppose a certain order or ordering in accordance with one or more reference points or guide marks, grounded in the “social contract” and regulated politically.

We may, for example, talk about religious minorities in a systemically ordered context, wherein any “minority” would emerge and define itself as being different from the “majority”. The ratio of forces between “minority” and majority” is regulated in the same manner that is employed in order to decide the authority of “voices” and their hierarchy, if it is possible to talk about hierarchy in this case.

The theological, perceived as an institutionalised “measure” of the religious phenomenon, becomes the “exorcised” expression of the individual (or collective) experience, adjusted within a framework, and adopted as a model or formative matrix at the communal level. The discourse of theology, by openly imparting knowledge to the masses, is inevitably contaminated by the imprint of ideology, since it is uncritically adopted and appropriated as such.

Propaganda and ideology are here to be understood, based on their ultimate meaning (divested of their usual negative outlook), as a “(pre)fabricated” message, coming “from the outside”, and efficiently dominating the mechanisms of insinuation: “as if” it came “from the inside”, “as if” it were naturally “yours”, and for that reason, it ought to be embraced without any reservations and redemptively conveyed to others. They are always ready to provide and propose concrete, tangible solutions. Seemingly insoluble situations and problems are instantly solved. The guilty persons, as well as the saviours, are immediately nominated and we are offered the key destined to possibly unlock every door.⁴

Ideology and propaganda pretend to meet the fundamentally human aspiration to “(re-)solve all the problems in the world”. This aspiration, usually laden with spiritual connotations, fails whenever it persists in affixing itself to palpable, “politically” wrought solutions, made in the image and likeness of man.

Thus, the solutions brought by social-political systems that programmatically deny any religious influence (explicitly excluding this dimension from the sphere of their own message or setting it apart, as a tolerant move) succeed in configuring a redemptive ideology, similar to the way in which religious doctrines operate in their own field. This fact has led an Eric Voegelin to put forward the suggestive formula of “political religions”⁵.

The vision according to which the theological and the political are organically co-generated categories was exemplarily expounded by Spinoza, in his *Theological-Political Treatise*⁶, for example. Theology implies a systematic vision (or, at least, clearly defined landmarks), expressed by means and devices intended to facilitate its transmission and reception. The text usually provides the supporting structure or the medium instrumentalised by theology in order for it to take shape, to be preserved and transmitted. Theological discourse is circumscribed and confined to the specific vision whence it stems and which it further represents. The power and durability of the text to withstand and constitute the “depository” of the message in time, as well as its “vehicle” in space (since the text seems to be the easiest way to “convey” a message), form the nucleus and the core of any doctrine or ideology. The permanence of the message, accompanied by its political influence and authority, gives rise to ideology, understood as sterile repeatability, assumed from outside, by virtue of compatibilities, constraints or interests.

The nature of permanence also rests under the sign of uniqueness, in a creative gesture, this time implying a new mode of transmission and/or reception of the message.

It is the means of conceiving and approaching a message that is particular to the oral and, later, to the scriptural traditions, prior to the articulation of any theology.

Interreligious communication considered as ecumenical dialogue is endowed with an implicit political dimension, and creates the possibility of building a bridge between ideologies through the very acceptance of their (peaceful) cohabitation. This dialogue is a dialogue of “texts” and doctrines, without actually succeeding in bringing together, face to face, the real message of the theologies involved - the endeavour is rather to defend, protect or mindfully delineate a particular vision. Ecumenism, as political standpoint, puts forward and constructs a “honeycomb” wherein “theologies” may rest untroubled, without interfering with each other.

The effective dialogue of religions should therefore also take place within frameworks other than the merely exterior ones provided by official meetings, political agreements or shared events and ceremonies.

Genuine dialogue and, consequently, living ecumenism would first and foremost involve the co-operation of theologians (rather than theologies!), by connecting and joining the text to the spiritual message from which the theological vision has originated. The emphasis would be

laid on the practical dimension of religion and the sharing of the religious experience. Religions as such do not exist: their *embodied* message is more than theology. The main reason for the practice of religion can (and should) not remain the producing and perpetuating of theology, but the transformation of man. This understanding of ecumenism could, in my opinion, permit the next step in the development of interreligious communication.

How could this new stage of ecumenism be envisaged or depicted?

Passing from the level of interreligious conflict and the imposition of one religion as supreme, the first step in the hierarchy of interreligious communication is religious tolerance, which requires and takes for granted the *de jure* cancellation of the doctrinal supremacy of any one religion over others. Numerical superiority might thus become, through a lack of political prerogatives, the criterion and instrument for further discrimination – necessary from the viewpoint of the “defeated” religion rejecting, as a first reaction, the “equality” of religions.

After the level of religious tolerance, envisaged as weak ecumenism, the next step brings into attention *de facto* communication among religions, at the level of theological doctrines, by removing the veil and partaking in the “core” of the corresponding visions. More precisely, respect and mere cohabitation without interference are step by step transformed into lively communication. To the ‘negative’ understanding of interreligious communication as non-violence and avoidance of conflict, the positive dimension of sharing religious experience and indulging in common spiritual endeavour would thus be added. As a result, theologies will no longer speak in their own language, for their own sake, while indifferently tolerating the “neighbouring” discourse; on the contrary, they will finally speak to each other, freed from the belligerent intentions usually come moulded in apologetics and proselytism. It is only at this point that the passage from ecumenism to what Nicolaus Cusanus called “the peace of religions” will become possible.

At this new level, a certain receptivity, readiness, and generosity of understanding are required – accompanied, as a mirror image, by a genuine search for self-apprehension, in order to find the adequate methods and tools to open up and make a particular theology and knowledge available not only to those who serve and practise it, by tradition or out of habit, but above all to those who want to approach it from outside. Dialogue does not imply renunciation of one’s own tradition or condemnation of others’.

The risks assumed by this kind of openness are huge from the perspective of the political stability of the doctrine: in fact, this kind of communication would lead, in a creative manner, to inevitable renewal and thus to a rebirth of the religious and spiritual message, which might take unexpected, unpredictable turns, one easily embraced by those who

are always ready to renounce, without any precaution, a dusty doctrine in exchange for a living message.

This kind of communication among religions would no longer develop within pre-established frameworks, confined to the boundaries of a particular theological vision, indefinitely using the same language (transformed in jargon or, even worse, *langue de bois*), but would favour new frameworks and contexts, shifting the emphasis from doctrine and its substantiation towards religious experience. The approach is not meant to find a solution in order to impose a new doctrine, and what is at stake is not to provide evidence for a system or to refute it, but rather to raise honest questions and give answers relevant not to the logic of the various systems, but to our knowledge as humans.

The emphasis is no longer laid on highlighting and exacerbating specific differences, by continuously setting boundaries for one's own territory, but rather on what "unites us". The doctrines, theologies or systems are no longer at the forefront; the leading position is taken over by the search for the first and ultimate principle. The unity of religions and their authentic communication is not to be found in the common lines or issues of their theologies. Sealing the dialogue of the doctrines by listing and totalising the common landmarks and lines of thought, at the textual and ideological level, is neither eloquent, nor convincing to us nowadays. The transition from political tolerance to doctrinal tolerance is but a small step, which preserves ideological contamination, as well as the immobility of the systems still regarded as being the ultimate reference point.

Even so, the ultimate principle cannot be "captured" and reduced to a system, nor can it express itself fully through a systematic theory. The risk of replacing the ultimate principle with a doctrine or a system bearing human face, due to its multiple secularised ramifications, is evident. Whenever the religious followers listen to the "voice" of the system rather than paying attention to the "voice" made present and manifest *by means of* the system, the situation may be easily compared to the parable of someone who, instead of looking at the moon, is staring at the finger pointing to the moon. It is only a short step from this to believing that the finger itself is the moon, or, in the best case, that this particular finger alone can point to the moon.

In conclusion, the endeavour to confront different theologies and religious doctrines might offer a framework for ideological substantiations, as well as for clearly tracing the lines of demarcation with regard to the explication or deduction, in a logical and apologetic manner, of the possible ramifications developed by these systems in all their details. The approach, however, will not be able to re-orientate the gaze toward what religion intends to point at, through its very essence. In other words, instead of opening the path toward the ultimate principle - in order to enhance this connection, taking as a starting point only the

manifestations reflected in texts, images, doctrines - the stress shifts, in the best case, toward the connection among systems.

The religious follower remains fastened to a system which thus confines the world and the viewpoint by cutting up and mutilating the path.

The connection pointed out by the authentic religious gesture forms a bridge between the interior viewpoint and the ultimate principle causing the viewpoint, regardless of the religious tradition taken into consideration (each tradition identifies, names and expresses in a different manner the two “heads” of the relation). Moreover, the etymology of the term “religion”, as it is used in the Indo-European languages, points toward the same general meaning⁷.

Gaze, face, authenticity

The level at which the “connection” - understood as (re)orientation of the gaze and the attention toward the ultimate principle - emerges and is fixed will also provide parameters for a better understanding of religious perception and experience. Whenever these parameters are inculcated by tradition or doctrine, the gaze does not belong to the one who looks. How and to what extent is it possible to see through the eyes of one system?

What we lack within the secularised frameworks of religious education in Europe is precisely this pedagogy of regaining one’s own gaze. In fact, the aim of religious systems is not represented by the systems themselves, but by the guidance and re-orientation of one’s own gaze along the way. If the system is or seems to be the same for everyone, the gaze of each person travelling along the way will be unique.

The refuse of uniqueness and thus authenticity nourishes systems and ideologies. The overestimation of differences and otherness, as well as unity and uniformity, without returning and restoring man’s image and likeness in their uniqueness, constitutes a tool to promote, implement, and perpetuate the ideological.

A reconfiguration of the concept of community and authority, as well as the key-elements they circumscribe, proves necessary at this point.

How might a community be defined, understood and crystallised in the absence of any ideological influence? Which are the hierarchies implied and developed by such a community, and how is the principle of authority reflected within the boundaries of such a community? What, in general, is the sense of community? A critical analysis regarding the foundations of religious cohabitation today is not the goal of the present study, and consequently I shall confine myself to highlighting some possible interrogations deriving from the debate about the idea of religious community.

To return back to our argument, several levels expressing the emergence of “connection” within the horizon of religious experience might be uncovered and understood as forming a bridge between one’s own gaze and the founding principle perceived as the ultimate way marker.

The different representations and embodiments of the ultimate principle reconfigure, in a mirror image, self-perception and self-identity, which are reshaped according to an apprehension of the ultimate reference point (functioning as a correlated and correlative term).

The multiple faces of the divine denote, implicitly and correspondently, different levels of perception, as well as different states of consciousness⁸, discernible, at the same time, as interior steps toward self-configuration. The projection is dual: the concomitance between one’s self(-representation) and the ultimate principle, in their essential relation, is amply approached. The impossibility of “figuring” and “imaging” the divine, or, even more so, the explicit interdiction to make a graven image or likeness, *i.e.* to materialise and embody the ultimate essence of the transcendent principle, is thematised in the same ample manner. Hence the impossibility of assigning a name to the “unnamed” principle stands for the impossibility of encompassing the divine or circumscribing and confining it to the earthly sphere. Unnamed itself, it bears all names, and faceless itself, it bears all faces.

The various reconfigurations of one’s own face within the dynamic of the personal relationship with the ultimate principle are indicative of the corresponding levels of inner trans-figuration and thus of the perception of self-identity.

The authenticity of this relationship bears witness to the possibility of inner transfiguration.

Following this line of thought, any “borrowed” relation, acquired by uncritically adopting and assuming a “face” (with reference to one’s own face or the “face” attributed to the divine), is the sign of an unauthentic, exterior belonging to one ideology or another. In short, non-authenticity gives rise to the ideological and proliferates it. Therefore, the more “depersonalised” and constrained is the individual relation, devoid of direct experience of the sacred (as a manifestation of the divine presence), the more powerful is the ideological “charge” of the respective religious tradition.

Whereas religiosity by definition implies a series of exterior signs, symbols and reference points relevant to a group, but also a series of practices, rites and ceremonies meant to bind together the community, in the case of spirituality, the lack of a secularised doctrine in the form of theology brings the personalised relationship (usually that of master/disciple) to the fore, and therefore the auroral gesture of inner (re-)birth resists exterior, uprooted petrification. In the spiritual realm, the steps of the divine hierarchy are inwardly reborn, this time at the level of

individual perception, by recognising the pre-eminence of the inner and by accordingly re-signifying outer and visible manifestations, taken as expressions of interiority. In this way, interiority, considered in its subjective dimension or understood as intra-divine dynamic, represents (beyond any “spatial” inside/outside, here/there reference) the ineffable and diaphanous register - unnameable and indefinable. It designates, par excellence, the lack of the deceiving mask and the presence of the living face irreducible to any particular manifestation. As a consequence, the complement of embodied, multifaceted exteriority, clearly perceived from the very first sight, is the “imperceptible” interiority which, unforeseeably, gives birth to forms, shapes or bodies. The safety ensured by the apparent stability of the exterior is complemented by the uncertainty of entering a totally uncontrollable, but paradoxically guiding realm. The spiritual experience succeeds in rooting out the intermediating “faces” of religious doctrines from their exterior, sterile immobility, and in making them fluid, by naturally bringing them into harmony with fruitful interiority. This transition, once perceived, reinstitutes the world and repositions the person undergoing this experience of the sacred in the right place wherefrom he may grasp the connections of his world and understand through the authenticity of a personal experience capable of reinstating the “flow” of all things along their proper path, without striving to imprint a “graven image” upon the manifestations of the visible.

By renouncing the imposition of a specific “face”, the gate opens onto the place where all faces come into being.

Whereas at the personal, individual level the imposition of a graven image represents an impediment and an obstacle (usually in the form of preconceived ideas or misconceptions petrified in more or less systematic visions), at the community level, the imposition of a graven image (by tradition or by adherence to one system or another) represents the grounds of ideology.

Faces carved in stone are recognisable in the obstinate will to convey a certain identity or a certain set of rules which are to be adopted and applied without requiring personal choice or conviction arising from critical thinking; they are merely transferred or imposed as the sole alternative, without offering any place for discussion of the hidden criteria of this specific choice, whose premises and goals usually remain unchallenged, since the message is transmitted without encouraging or allowing any prior exercise of the free will. This is why education within frameworks which do not allow or perpetuate critical thinking (as opposed to delivering data and “objective” knowledge) constitutes a form of manipulation and ideological indoctrination. Consequently, man’s actions and conceptions may in this way be controlled and conducted according to artificial criteria in the service of alien goals. The impossibility of previously experiencing the state of inner freedom makes

the bondage to one or another ideology appear “natural”, as any value judgement has already been contaminated (even before it can be articulated).

The Cartesian method of doubt⁹ is, in this respect, the critical attitude required for self-reconstruction, as a reflex of inner freedom regained. Repositioning and re-location within a new horizon is a sign of an advance along the way. However, transforming one’s own path into a theory of the path invested with “objective” legitimacy is the germ of the ideologisation and petrification of freedom under the guise of a message that should otherwise constitute only one step in the process of comprehending.

This is why, following the spiritual line of oral traditions, the spiritual master does not configure systems or coherent doctrines aimed at offering an ultimate image or understanding of reality. The spiritual master maintains a state of freedom and authenticity; in doing so, he avoids producing, imprinting or imposing counterfeit “faces”, and always expresses, in a unique way, the uniqueness of a particular situation or state.

In this light, any endeavour to approach the divine nature by interposing an image, configuration or articulation with claims to explicative value is nothing but a deviation, in the form of a mental projection meant to replace the ultimate principle, by insinuating itself as the sole path and ultimate truth.

Therefore, knowledge acquired via initiation is never meant to become collective; it remains subjective and thus authentic, unique, inalienable. It in fact rejects political expression in the form of the many reduced to a multitude by following the same path. The perspective is reversed: the path takes its unique course for each and every follower.

Otherwise, we may talk about “series of followers”. Whenever a path is clearly articulated, described in detail, and imposed as a model or formula, the political dimension becomes manifest.

It is the same distinction we may make when talking, for example, about the different objects created by an artist and the same kind of objects produced in a series, which are seemingly identical because they have the same pattern. The former objects, made by the artist, are unique and individual, bearing a “personalised”, authentic message, whereas the latter objects irritate due to the “power” of their message trying to impose and multiply the same “face”; each object in this second category gives the impression that it can at any time replace or be replaced by any other similar object from the same series, while the author himself usually remains unknown, since his imprint is neither personal nor personalised.

Man creates objects that claim to be identical. One cannot find, in nature, two perfectly identical objects or entities. The desire brutally and commercially to multiply and reproduce the same message and thus to impose it by sheer numbers is political in nature and points toward an

understanding of a sense of community that distorts by obliging every follower to borrow the same unspecific, unnatural and unauthentic “face”.

How then might uniqueness be regained in the communal (and political) context? In other words, what, in this case, would be the new “face” of authority, regarded not as an imposing power, but as a creative one, which would enable re-formation and re-orientation toward one’s own path?

The answer formulated by political theories generally comes under the category of utopian visions.

Within the religious framework, the answer is offered by the oral traditions which propose the transmission of knowledge via initiation.

In Judaism, the highest and most suggestive formula to express this relation is “mouth to mouth” or “face to face” (with reference to God and Moses). The authenticity of oral culture, as well as its power, perceived as “invisible” authority, is easily recognisable in any religious tradition whenever it makes reference to its (auroral) “contexts” characterized by the oral. What does the written text change in the process of transmitting the message by using imprinted materials? The written text endangers the message itself, which borrows the same (graphic or graven) “face”, being apparently available (and identical) to everyone in the community that tries to approach it. Moreover, the message is endangered a second time due to the potential for the imposition of a common understanding of the text, thus obliterating the original or authentic message. Whenever reference is made not to the text itself, but to a commonly accepted understanding of the text, the political dimension prevails. The text meant to bear witness to a unique and authentic message is abusively (and ideologically) replaced by a distorted, uniform interpretation.

Texts, the same as things and beings, are unique, not only in themselves, but also (and especially) in relation to the “reader”. Uniqueness is manifest not only at the level of the essence (in that it is one particular thing rather than another), but especially at the level of the relation (as a being together). Any existence essentially rests under the sign of the relation. In this case, how could we impose on a text the way it should “face” (or relate to) its reader?

To accept uniqueness and allow it to be unveiled as a relation means to renounce ideology and propaganda, and to put forward a new “face” for authority.

*More is different.*¹⁰ Many does not mean each is the same, but each is unique.

Through its highest message, spirituality offers a path without boundaries, a path which is built with every step while advancing, thus opening the way for the manifestation of the sacred, made possible only by reducing to silence any personal project or deflecting any intervention rooted in systems or articulations designed to substitute for reality. In other words, the world we live in and what we are depend on our mental

projections. The reconfiguration of self-perception (and self-identity) will entail successive reconfigurations of the way we perceive the world (and vice versa).

The religious and the spiritual: a necessary distinction

Any message propagated at the level of the community will inevitably be contaminated by the risk of becoming ideological from the outset. If its authority is also imposed at the institutional level, then political contamination will be obvious.

The religious or spiritual experience, once transferred in an articulated manner, becomes theology, acquiring, by assuming authority, a political dimension as well.

At this point, a distinction is required in order adequately to approach the understanding of religious experience.

The methodological distinction I propose is that between “religious” and “spiritual”. This differentiation is meant to distinguish between an ideologically contaminated message and one freed from doctrinal or systematic constraints.

The religious message belongs to a specific system described as religion, theology or religious tradition, whereas the spiritual message is personal and resists any systematic appropriation.¹¹ Buddha was not a Buddhist, Christ was not a Christian, Muhammad was not a Muslim, in the same way in which we cannot say that someone is born a carpenter, a journalist or a cook. All these “attributes”, denoting a belonging to a specific system (be it religious, political or professional), appear on the scene *post factum*. Ideologies are the same: they intervene in an abusive way. The spiritual message is born as such, and it naturally emerges without being forged within the framework of any doctrinal or systematic approach. The spiritual message is not “added”. It emerges from within. Imposition is present whenever one form suffocates the other. Ideology strangles and suffocates the pre-existent “strata”, whereas the spiritual message transfigures, without remainder.

By its very nature, personal experience is never ideologically framed. It organically eludes any system. The natural follows “systems” other than the ideological, the counterfeit.

Religion, inasmuch as it institutes itself as a system to be imposed or embraced, comes under the reign of the ideological. Any structure, configuration or ideational system embodied within a predictable doctrine becomes, through instrumentation, an ideology. Freed from any political claim, these structures are the expression of a natural, disinterested phenomenality.

The ideological is founded on the obstinacy of incarceration, always insisting on imposing a form through aggression toward others.

Religion, taken as a system, is ideological in nature, whereas spirituality rejects any doctrinal framework and preserves what is unique, unrepeatable, authentic. Preaching authenticity means a programmatic renunciation of any “content” which might be transferred or adopted as such. This, for example, is the difference between giving someone a fish and teaching him how to fish.

The spiritual message is characterised by its gratuitousness. It emerges without any systematic “intent”, as a purified expression of the transcendent principle, which can never be “captured” or enclosed within a system.

Spirituality supposes the unforeseen and perpetual spontaneity. Religion grants safety and stability, as if conferring “life insurance”, or even “next life insurance”, depending on the “system”.

This is why we always say “spiritual master”, but never “religious master”.

Religion and authority

Religious traditions display, according to the specific features and “imaginaire” of a particular culture, make manifest the relationship between man and ultimate principle (regardless of different means of describing, imagining or interpreting it) in different ways. Religious systems, however coherent they might be, are thus meant to provide a “vehicle” to preserve and transfer this relation through texts, techniques, practices or rites that have the power to reinstitute, perpetuate and re-enhance the connection for oneself, as well as for others. This intermediating power should not confer grandness and authority upon the system, but rather it should point toward the grandeur and authority of the ultimate principle as it reveals itself and makes itself present and manifest through the system. The repeatability of ritual refreshes and nuances the relation, endowing it with rhythm and continuity.

Consequently, any petrification and imposition of a religious system in order to preserve and perpetuate the authority of that system, as higher than and a substitution for the ultimate principle, represents a deviation from the authentic relation, which is thus replaced by “idolatry”. The founding principle is reduced to and identified with the system being proselytised.

In this light, several levels of interreligious communication are to be discerned, according to the emphasis placed on communication among religious systems themselves or between man and the ultimate principle through the intermediary of religious systems.

Schematically, I would represent these different layers as follows:

Reference points	Spiritual authority	Political authority
man	- spiritual master/ leader - intermediary	- political leader - head
system	- liturgical value - to intermediate - presence of the principle	- ideological value - to manipulate - obnubilation of the principle
principle	- authenticity - non-system	- deviation, substitution - reversal of the principle-system

The “religious”, as a category, might thus be situated between the “spiritual” and the “political”, since it incorporates and is contaminated by both registers.

Consequently, religious communities will also bear a more spiritual or political imprint.

The stronger the ideological dimension, the less evident the possibility of regaining an authentic relationship, as the system gradually replaces the principle.

The stronger the liturgical dimension, the more evident the possibility of an authentic relationship emerging, as the system itself is receptive to intermediating the manifestation of the principle.

The two possible moves, if we take into consideration the methodological distinction between spiritual and political authority, are, metaphorically, the “descent” of the principle and the “ascent” of the system.

The consequences are in each and every case different:

The “descent” of the principle invigorates the system by strengthening its power to intermediate. In this way, the system does not become petrified or mere reflection of the human mind, but rather unites the different levels of the hierarchy in a creative manner, functioning as a ladder between man and the founding principle.

The “ascent” of the system implies the dethronement of the principle and its substitution with a “graven image” or idol. The system, separated from its founding principle, is no longer able to function as an intermediary and thus becomes a rigid structure, proliferating and striving to impose itself as the principle or the unique path leading to the principle.

Interreligious communication will develop differently, according to the pre-eminence granted to spiritual or, contrariwise, political authority.

Once these precautionary steps have been taken, we may move on to an outline of the different types and mechanisms of interreligious communication, making reference to the methodological distinctions put forward and explained in this study.

Political authority and ecumenism

Interreligious communication, as a political *desideratum* and consequently as a political programme, is instantiated in its weak form as religious tolerance and, in its stronger version, as ecumenism. The latter excludes any differentiation among religious systems or doctrines recurring to criteria that lead to any possible kind of discrimination (ethnic, political, religious etc.).

This understanding of interreligious (and interdenominational) dialogue recognises the intrinsic value of every religious system and promotes freedom of belief, placing the emphasis on religious cohabitation and avoidance of religious conflict.

Communication is not real, but desirable and encouraged. Ecumenism in fact programmatically proposes and provides arguments for non-violence and the equality of religions.

The higher dimension of ecumenism is developed by bringing together, within different frameworks and contexts, representatives of the cohabitant religions, in order to build a bridge between different doctrines and thus to enhance real dialogue.

The academic milieu might offer, in this respect, an adequate, neutral framework for discussion and research *sine ira et studio*.

In conclusion, the axis of ecumenism is represented by the communication of the systems, its stake being mainly political.

Spiritual authority and “the peace of religions”

As a mirror image, spiritual communication among religions would no longer place at the forefront the problem of religious toleration and cohabitation, but would concentrate on bringing religious systems together in the (common) search for an approach to the ultimate principle, in order to reinstitute and deepen the human/divine relationship.

As a result, the axis is now represented by the man/ultimate principle relationship, the various systems, doctrines and theories brought into discussion being instrumental and secondary. I have called this *modus* of interreligious co-operation “the peace of religions”, borrowing the suggestive formula introduced by Nicolaus Cusanus.

This understanding of the religious dialogue reveals the positive dimension of interreligious communication that is no longer placed under the sign of avoidance of conflicts and promotion of co-operation, but is reinstituted out of a desire to impart and share knowledge.

At this level, communication overcomes the reserved, cautious and timid attitude, since it takes as a premise familiarity to be pre-existent by the virtue of the ultimate principle that bestows unity in diversity. This unity, however, is not the unity of doctrine, but the unity that expresses

itself through multiplicity¹². The new stage shifts the attention from the unity of one's belief or doctrine to the unembodied unity of the ultimate principle unveiled in multiple forms, dimensions or attributes.

"Peace" is not instituted *between* or *among* systems, but emerges in the meantime through recognition of the principle.

This is the postulate formulated by Frithjof Schuon in terms of the "transcendent unity of religions"¹³.

The solution is not to reduce a system to the matrix of the other or to reduce multiple systems to a general matrix for the sake of "peaceful" uniformity. Communication does not imply annulment of diversity or the particular features of the different systems, and it does not derive from the imposition and promotion of one doctrine or opinion over others. The peace of religions, as formulated here, is fundamentally correlated to the unity of the ultimate principle and does not derive from the imposition of one system as the principle of unity. By its status, every system belongs to the realm of created things, and thus, to the realm of multiplicity. Only the unity of the ultimate principle is absolute, since only the ultimate principle is the unlimited One.

Whereas René Guénon endeavoured to substantiate the communicability of the religious systems by highlighting common or complementary symbols, themes and meanings, Frithjof Schuon goes further, leaving the level of "system to system" communication behind, and pointing toward the communication of systems by virtue of the ultimate principle.

The "peace of religions" moves the stress from systems and theories to the personal authentic human/divine relation.

In this new light, development and evolution can no longer be conceived in terms of the elaboration and improvement of systems, but in terms of recovery of the human/divine personalised relationship by means of personal development.

Education and interreligious communication

Such a significant reversal would implicitly lead to a substantial reform of the educational system.

The passage from a weak understanding of interreligious communication to educational systems that promote ecumenism in its highest version is already perceptible.

Taking into consideration, for example, the case of the educational systems in the post-communist countries, the precarious diversity of the denominational programmes (usually organised within theology faculties or departments) still preserves (or even recalls) the atmosphere of religious toleration. At the same time, interdenominational and non-denominational Religious Studies programmes are developed within official academic frameworks.

The further opening toward developing programmes unshackled to “disciplinarity” is to be found only in countries with a tradition of promoting ecumenism *de facto*. I refer to the development of new multi- and meta-disciplinary frameworks and projects intended to unite specialists and researchers from different fields (including Theology and Religious Studies) in a common approach focused on issues relevant to the understanding of the “ultimate reality”.

I would underline, in this respect, the endeavour to develop new fields and research areas such as the study of consciousness (bringing together specialists and researchers in the natural sciences: Neurobiology, Biochemistry, Microbiology, Brain Computer Interfaces, Theoretical Physics, Applied Mathematics, etc.) or contemplative sciences (initiated by Buddhist monks in cooperation with Western scientists).¹⁴

Multi-disciplinarity and meta-disciplinarity¹⁵ are not meant to reduce the religious phenomenon to a mere scientific experiment or ideology, but rather to foster educational paradigms able to develop new frameworks for emerging fields of research.

Religious minorities and ecumenism

In this new light, how might we reconfigure the debate about religious minorities and communication with them? What are the particular features of this debate in Central and Eastern Europe? A possible answer might be provided by a consideration of the concretisation of the relationship between political and religious authority in this particular context.

Terms such as “religion”, “minority”, “denomination”, in their plural form (“religions”, “minorities”, “denominations”), refer to different groups and communities embracing a system, a doctrine or a set of beliefs and practices, which confer, by adherence to them, a group identity.

The denominations have distinguished themselves mainly based on their doctrine, whereas minorities are to be defined in their correlation with the (numerical or political) majority. Consequently, religious minorities are to be understood by reference to the correlative religious majority. In non-democratic countries, the religious majority is defined by its adherence to the “official religion” or “state-religion”; in this case, the religious minorities are subordinated and marginalized, functioning as a tolerated “periphery”.

What does “religious minority” mean? The criterion for establishing a hierarchy is related either to the small number of adherents, without involving any other value judgement, or to the precarious political status of the respective community, in comparison with the officially favoured religion.

Thus, the only option left is value judgement, which supposes the hierarchy of the religions themselves; this perspective is rejected *de iure* in

democratic countries, but accepted *de facto* in countries which promote the principles of democracy without succeeding in putting them into practice.

In communist and post-communist countries, for example, the Christian religion functioned and was “naturalised” as a state religion; for a long period of time, there was no religious education in terms of actually promoting tolerance or interreligious dialogue.

What are the effects of this situation today?

The majority, who embraced the official religion without necessarily practising it, also uncritically adopted the ideology that claimed the superiority of that religion as the sole depository of the truth.

Openness toward ecumenism, politically required by the shift from a dictatorial regime, has provoked in these countries several reactions that are difficult for neighbouring countries with longer democratic traditions to understand. To be more exact, the passage from the recognition of one religion to acceptance of the equality of all cohabitant denominations is slow and onerous, and comes up against the resistance of the erstwhile “first religion”, which loses its political prerogatives.

In these circumstances, the “defeated” religion will nonetheless fight for authority, this time invoking numerical (non-political) superiority in order to preserve its supremacy. Maintaining and increasing the number of its followers becomes the instrument for preservation or recovery of (political) authority.

The new situation may be described as follows: officially, the “defeated” religion sustains and promotes ecumenism (in accordance with the official political requirements), whereas unofficially, in its own places of worship and before its adherents, it preaches, even more than before, its superiority, as well as the duty and need to be intolerant toward all the other denominations, which are regarded and presented as the incarnation of evil.

The demonisation of other religious traditions and the practice of superficial ecumenical tolerance, as a mere political interface, emerging in official contexts alone, lead, for the moment, to the impossibility of attaining any *de facto* the level of interreligious communication.

Any debate regarding religious minorities in a particular context will inevitably refer to political and geopolitical reference points, when the topic of spatial demarcation is touched upon. “Central and Eastern Europe”, for example, would function, in the framework of such a debate, as part of a “map” which is politically defined, and delineated.¹⁶ It is not an area we delimit and identify in purely geographical terms; on the contrary, “Central and Eastern Europe” is particularised as such according to criteria other than neutral geographical ones; it actually represents a geographical area delimited by political boundaries on a political map.

From a religious perspective, “Central and Eastern Europe” is characterised by features deriving from the specific way this area has

evolved historically and politically. We may, on the one hand, talk about the secularisation of religion in particular institutionalised forms, and, on the other, about the evolution and dynamic of these developed forms, according to the different political regimes which have regulated and imposed power (and authority) relations.

Ioan Petru Culianu¹⁷ proposes a binary model to explain the functioning and generation of the mind, showing that different systems of thought are produced by different combinations which cover a map of all the existing possibilities for the creation of combinations. These *mind games* generate diverse and diversified structures, which partly overlap and communicate. Each of the mind-generated systems has the same legitimacy, as value judgements, at this level, are pointless and superfluous. To the question of how it nevertheless comes about that in history some models and systems prevail and impose themselves over others, Ioan Petru Culianu answers by distinguishing between “mind games” and “power games”. Since every single mind-generated model has the same value in the mind realm, the actualisation and imposition of one possibility chosen from among others is a matter of power. The mind game would thus imply absolute freedom in terms of the generation of models and constraining power in terms of the actualisation and imposition of systems in history.

In conclusion, the power play between spiritual and political authority reconfigures the map of religions and the framework of interreligious communication.

The political *desideratum* of interreligious communication finds its model in ecumenism, whereas the spiritual *desideratum* puts forward “the peace of religions”.

Once taken to its final outcome, the accomplishment of the spiritual *desideratum* might be illustrated suggestively, from a Christian perspective, by the image of the messianic age.

Notes:

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² The formula *pax fidei* introduced by Nicolaus Cusanus in his treatise of the same name (*De pace fidei*) was translated by “peace of belief” (literal translation) or “peace of religion(s)” (figurative meaning).

³ Different perspectives and methods (historical, theological, philological, philosophical, sociological, anthropological, phenomenological, integrative etc.), stressing either the experiential dimension (practice, techniques, ritual) or the philosophical and hermeneutical approach (text, discourse, hermeneutical

devices, interpretation) are used, most of the time independently, in the research area of Religious Studies. This is why, in the present study, special attention was paid, contextually speaking, to authors combining the applied analysis of the religious experience and the philosophical interpretation using hermeneutical devices (e.g., Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, Giuseppe Tucci, Henry Corbin, Gershom Scholem, Henri de Lubac, Frithjof Schuon, Vladimir Lossky, Roberte Hamayon, Moshe Idel, Jean-Luc Marion). Insofar as the interreligious perspective is concerned, the research conformed to the methodological concept of *perspectivism* as reformulated by Moshe Idel: "By this concept [perspectivism] I designate the possibility of interrogating a certain religious literature from the perspective of acquaintance with another religious literature. This is neither a matter of comparison [...], nor a case of historical filiation between two bodies of writing or thought. It is rather an attempt to better understand the logic of systems by comparing substantially different ones and learning about one from the other". Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders*, (Budapest/New York: Central European University Press, 2005), 11.

⁴ For the different interpretations regarding the meanings and mechanisms of ideology and its relation to religion, see: Peter Scott, *Theology, Ideology and Liberation*, Series: *Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1936), Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), David Hawkes, *Ideology* (London: Routledge, 2003), Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), Terry Eagleton, *Ideology. An introduction*, (New York: Verso, 1991). For the ideological dimension in configuring and developing the Religious Studies area from the educational point of view, see: Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies. Contributors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵ See Eric Voegelin, *Modernity Without Restraint, Collected Works*, Volume 5 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 19-74.

⁶ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. and ed. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing House, 2001).

⁷ See, for instance, Clara Auvray-Assayas, "Religio", in *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies* (Paris: Le Seuil/Le Robert, 2004).

⁸ For the relation between religion and the study of consciousness, see Philip Clayton et. al., *The Re-Emergence of Emergence. The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion*, ed. Philip Clayton and Paul Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Philip Clayton, *Mind and Emergence. From Quantum to Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁹ See René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin - Bibliothèque des textes philosophiques, 1987).

¹⁰ The formula was introduced by P.W. Anderson in "More is different", *Science*, New Series 177, 4047 (1972): 393-396.

¹¹ For the various definitions and interpretations of spirituality in its connectedness to religion, see: W. James, *The varieties of religious experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: forms, foundations, methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (NY: Riverhead Books, 1999), Michael Hogan, *The Culture of Our Thinking in Relation to Spirituality* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2010), Matthew

Alper, *The "God" Part of the Brain: A Scientific Interpretation of Human Spirituality and God* (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2008).

¹² For the dynamics between unity and multiplicity in religious and theological context, and the critical understanding of monotheism, see: Henry Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris: L'Herne, 1981), T. W. Jennings, *Beyond Theism: A Grammar of God-Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A theology of multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008), M. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990) and *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), J. Kirsch, *God Against the Gods: The History of the War Between Monotheism and Polytheism* (New York: Penguin, 2004), Loren Stuckenbruck and Wendy North, *Early Jewish and Christian monotheism* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers, Faith, Trinity, Incarnation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), Michael Taylor, *Theological Reflections: On the Trinity, Christology, and Monotheism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002).

¹³ Frithjof Schuon, *De l'Unité Transcendante des Religions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

¹⁴ See, for example, <http://www.cbs.mpg.de/index.html>, <http://consciousness.arizona.edu/index.htm>, <http://www.colorado.edu/research/>, <http://www.mindandlife.org/>, <http://www.contemplativemind.org/>, http://www.brown.edu/Faculty/Contemplative_Studies_Initiative/ etc.

¹⁵ For a meaning analysis with regard to the emerging features of metadisciplinarity, see: Michael Finkenthal, *Interdisciplinarity. Toward the Definition of a Metadiscipline?*, American University Studies, Series V, Philosophy, vol. 187 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001).

¹⁶ See Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: the Map of Civilisation on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). For a complex analysis regarding the religious boundaries of Central and Eastern Europe, see Monica Neațu, "Ortodoxie și catolicism în Europa sud-estică în prima jumătate a secolului al XIII-lea" (PhD diss., University of Bucharest, 2008).

¹⁷ See Ioan Petru Coulianu, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*, trans. Hilary Suzanne Wiesner and I.P. Coulianu (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

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