Interreligious Dialogue in a Fragmented World: Evidence for Coexistence and Convergence

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Abstract: In today's fragmented and globalized world, the economy and technology are both in need of an orientative spiritual base. Philosopher Karl Jaspers's account of the axial age as giving rise to distinct regional religious identities is now giving way to a more local pluralism. Instead of a “clash of civilizations,” a certain dialogical existence offers the opportunity for both distinct identity and its apparent opposite, integration. The Focolare Movement’s experience of interreligious dialogue serves as an example for understanding this phenomenon conceptually through the sociological/anthropological lens of gift, where identity is dependent on the establishment of gratuitous relationships. Religious identity is reinforced precisely through openness to diversity, suggesting a possible ushering in of a new “axial age” in which religions converge while simultaneously remaining distinct, thereby fostering a more integral humanity.

Introduction

In 1949, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) wrote: “A total metamorphosis of history has taken place. The essential fact is: there is no longer anything outside. The world is closed. The unity of the earth has arrived. New perils and new opportunities are revealed. All the crucial problems have become world problems.”1 The American sociologist Richard Madsen also emphasizes, correctly in our opinion, that in the midst of the volumes of writings on “globalization” spanning the last sixty years there has been little systematic study of a possible spiritual basis for global interdependence between power and wealth.2 More than ever, we are confronted with a plurality of religions. In the global social context, fragmentation seems to dominate when trying to understand the situation of traditional religions. In the view of many, this results in religions seemingly having significantly less impact on society than in the past. In this situation of perceived weakness, envisioning religions as able to offer a consistent spiritu-

ality for a “globalized society” is no longer easily evident. Nevertheless Italian theologian Piero Coda sees new opportunities even today: “In this situation where the economy and technology are driving us toward new horizons, understanding and management of unity on a political level has shown itself to be inadequate.”

The author explains: “Since politics lacks a culture capable of organizing justice, universal fraternity, and the common good of the whole human family, unity remains practically attainable on a certain level, but absent from the goals achieved by technological and economic performances.” He concludes: “[T]oday a political culture of unity is missing because a spirit of unity is missing. Such a political culture of unity is possible only where there is a spirit of unity, a soul that provides momentum, prophecy, and a concreteness of political vision.” For Coda, “[R]eligious pluralism are at the forefront of this challenge, because they are called to generate this new life and make this spirit of unity available.”

Yet wouldn’t it have been easier if there was just one religion to draw upon for global consensus? Or is it better to think in a way similar to that of Sheng Yen, Zen master and founder of the Buddhist organization in Taiwan, Dharma Drum Mountain: “The days of monocultural societies are long gone and will not return again; and fortunately so, otherwise the destiny of humanity would be a very tragic one!” Sheng Yen bases his reasoning on the idea that harmony cannot be found in dogmatic homogenization nor in the elimination of differences. We will give further consideration to this point later, but first let us consider the situation of religious pluralism present in our world today.

Here, it becomes important to think about the meaning of religious pluralism. We can start from an analysis of the historical evolution of pluralism through a “lens” that sees different religions as an opportunity, rather than an obstacle, for a more harmonious, shared human existence.

Following this approach, the first part of this article discusses the historical relationships that have existed among religions, referring in particular to Karl Jaspers’s approach concerning what he called “axial religions.” A second part offers a possible interpretation of the contemporary phenomenon of religious pluralism in light of a particular sociological focus on social relationships and their quality. This can be useful in interpreting the significance of the different religious “fragments” characterizing our world. The third part of this article offers considerations for placing this view of religious pluralism into the broader context of current global challenges.

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3. See Paolo Frizzi’s concept of “plural globalism” (“mondialità plurale”) in his Religioni e disordine mondiale (Rome: Città Nuova, 2017), 7, where he qualifies the actual situation as “a long and complex transition which is both historical and paradigmatic, where political, social and economic elements are intertwined with religious issues.”


9. Many authors agree today that the situation where one religion dominated an entire geographical region or large parts of a geographical region in a hegemonic way has been an exception in history. Instead pluralism in the same territory has been the norm. See Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas (eds.), The Axial Age and Its Consequences.
religious pluralism and its potential in an evolving process oriented towards the future.

From axial religions to religious pluralism

In 1949, Jaspers published his most famous book, *The Origin and Goal of History*. He proposed the idea of a historical era of civilization which he called “the axial age” (800–200 BCE). New religions and systems of thought were born independently in at least five areas of the world. During that period, Jaspers wrote: “Man as we know him today, came into being.”

He was referring to Greek philosophy, the monotheism of Hebrew scriptures that would later serve as the origin of Christianity and Islam, the figure of Zoroaster in Persia, Lao-Tse and Confucius in China, and Mahavir and Buddha in India, as well as the Hinduism of the Upanishads.

As Belgian scholar, Staf Hellemans, suggested in his interpretation of Jaspers writings, this era marked the beginning of a series of initially small-scale, delicate spiritual innovations that grew in depth, importance, and breadth over time. So it was a decisive epoch for the beginning process of axialization, of this revolution that would have an impact so significant as to influence the identity of vast regions that are now known precisely in the context of the predominant axial religion present in a given area – Christian Europe, the Islamic middle east, Hinduism in India, Buddhist Southeast Asia, and Confucianist Chines society. The kind of religious domination exercised in their respective geographical regions brought Hellemans to qualify at least some as “hegemonic” axial religions.

According to Jaspers, these great religions and thought systems have three characteristics in common. The first is that they introduce a new experience of a higher, more powerful transcendence. Previously, gods had resembled human beings, even if they were greater, stronger, and above all immortal. With the axial religions, the monotheistic God, the world-soul of Hinduism, and the Heaven of Confucianism, became totally “other” and were removed from the human capacity to conceive of them. A more abstract view of the world, based on more universal principles, resulted in a more critical view of earlier religious thought. A second characteristic of the axial religions was the importance given to the interior dimension of the individual, to faith, to devotion, and to ethical awareness. Magic, rituals, and sacrifices didn’t disappear entirely, but they came to be scaled back, with individual religious practice gradually distinguished from collective religious practice. A third characteristic was that of the forming of particular religious communities that were distinct from the political communities; the new religions increased their institutional autonomy with respect to political power and laypeople became deeply committed disciples of priests or teachers who transmitted religious and philosophical doctrines.

Transcendentalization, individualization, and more autonomous institutionalization were three fundamental characteristics shared by all the new axial religions. Thus, as a result, these new religions tended to pass beyond the circle of the clan, city, or ethnic group, and

revealing their potential as religions with a universal vocation. During this era, it appears likely that suitable conditions for the development of such religious currents existed in humanity in some way. These may have initiated a fundamental, shared step forward in the advanced civilizations of that time. But, in spite of these common traits, the frameworks of evolving religious thought developed along autonomous, divergent paths.

We have arrived now at our modern day epoch, where diverse “fragments” linked to different religious systems emerge once again because of the continued globalization process. But this time these fragments are no longer in different, far-away regions. Rather, these diverse religions are now present in the same territories, thereby presenting unprecedented pluralistic aspects, ones that provoke urgent questions with regard to the possibilities of holding all these diversities together.

**Religious fragmentation: an opportunity?**

Religious pluralism can be manifested according to different phenomenological typologies. For example, forms of fragmented, “tolerant” pluralism can be observed. But they are not able to bring different identities into a deeper dialogue, and can result in forms of syncretism or religious relativism that eliminate true diversity. An instrumental or strategic relativism can also be seen as one oriented only to conflict resolution rather than being capable to truly strengthening coexistence. In addition, we can also observe forms of conflictual pluralism that destroy rather than validate individual identities. Such forms of pluralism “serve the interests of a particular hegemonic identity tending to assimilate others to itself.”13

The question arises if we could instead consider religious pluralism as an opportunity that contributes to transforming “clashes of civilizations”14 into “encounters of civilizations,”15 where different religions can nourish “places” for “dialogical coexistence,”16 “places” for building a fully integrated humanity, by bringing together the countless riches, including religious ones, which have been bestowed upon the whole of humanity.

In this perspective, the challenge of “fragmentation” touches on elements related to coexistence, and to encounters in diversity. It ultimately becomes a kind of relational question with respect to the quality of interreligious relations. In particular, it is an issue of balance between opposing tendencies that run through all social relationships. One tendency is oriented towards affirmation of one’s identity often at the expense of others while the second is oriented towards reinforcement of integration and belonging with the risk of losing individual identities.

Encounters capable of animating a “dialogical coexistence” need to nourish both these tendencies, seeing the concept of identity “not . . . in the subject, but in the relationship; so it is seen as an ongoing, constructive, and ever open process.”17


Observing moments of dialogical coexistence
How can we be sure such forms of interreligious relationships are capable of balancing the tension between these two opposing poles? In analyzing the qualities of relationships, a fruitful sociological perspective begins from the anthropological observation of the gift, a phenomenon constituted not by a unilateral act, but by three actions linked together (giving, receiving, and giving in return) which constitute a form of exchange, one found by anthropologists to be universally widespread in ancient and traditional societies. It served to create and reinforce social relationships among groups by means of the circulation of objects – gifts to be precise – that often had a symbolic value rather than an economic one: a gift represents an invitation to enter into a relationship, to build an alliance.

The populations creating this explained that the “driving force” for this system was the spiritual power contained in the object being exchanged, one which drew out in the recipient a sort of obligation to reciprocate, as a gesture confirming engagement in an alliance. But such an obligation appeared to have a paradoxical characteristic, in that it always remained “free.” The donor could direct the counter-gift to others who were different from the first donor; he or she was not conditioned in terms of the ways, time frame, or the object itself. Indeed, he or she was free to not follow up with regard to the gift at all. Furthermore, even if the gift seemed to be totally gratuitous, deep down it revealed an interest, a particular interest in building a connection.

In his observational research on various practices of gift giving, renowned anthropologist, Marcel Mauss saw the gift in the context of these ambivalences as a reciprocal action “driven by mixed motives” which were paradoxical (obligation/freedom, interest/gratuitousness). They created a “structure of reciprocity,” of relationships between “symmetrical groups,” between equals.

The gift carries on its function as the “principal operator in building social bonds,” according to other scholars following in the footsteps of M. Mauss’s work. This is due to what is called its value of bonding, or in other words its “gratuitousness.” This leads to an acting and relating to one another unconditionally (i.e. without a guarantee of receiving something in return) and signifies risk-taking in order to accomplish what Caillé calls, a “leap into the unknown.” This unconditionality is the specific logic of reciprocal action and generates “properly human” relationships. In a relational dynamic, if obligation is the motivating factor, one could speak of “power relationships.” Similarly, if instead specific interests prevail, the relationships created could be called “instrumental.”

23. Jacques Godbout, Quello che circola tra noi. Dare ricevere e ricambiare (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2008), 117.
Properly human relationships are those in which the human person can express him or herself globally and feel recognized in one’s entirety, while at the same time recognizing that he or she is incomplete on one’s own and therefore in need of others, of that connection with another that is a “constitutive dimension of one’s own identity.” Indeed, the human person recognizes his or her being within this framework, where one’s own existence comes about because of others, beginning from the earliest moments of life. In other words one is “an indebted being,” ontologically obliged to freely reciprocate, in a certain sense.

Through freedom – where awareness of obligation in the gift is transformed into an act of freedom expressed through giving, receiving, and freely repaying in one’s own turn – comes an impulse of “gratitude” that “involves an impulse towards others, a desire, an interest in the others,” according to G. Simmel, including through the precious differences borne by each one’s individual identity in a relational framework.

So the theory of gift offers “lenses” by which to see a kind of reconfigured relationship between obligation and freedom, between the opposing tensions of identity and the need for belonging – both of which are essential for “dialogical coexistence.” In the framework of gift, both identity and integration-belonging become co-essential, since identity is born and reinforced through the belonging to something in common, which in its turn, cannot exist if it is not based on specific and distinct identities that enable foundational exchanges of connection and membership to continue. Rather than being an obstacle in this perspective, religious pluralism and diversity seem to be a precondition for its possible composition in the form of “dialogical coexistence.”

At this point, the empirically and sociologically oriented mind must pose questions regarding “fragmentation” and examine it phenomenologically – not in order to understand which is the “true” religion, but rather to bring about this “dialogical coexistence.” Through theoretical “lenses” described earlier, this question could lead us to examine the existence and function of such phenomena of encounter among religions, of interreligious relationships modeled on this reality of gift.

In a beginning response to this question, we offer here some cues drawn from field research undertaken over several few years in an attempt to understand the phenomenon of interreligious dialogue promoted by the Focolare Movement since the 1960s, and ask whether it could be considered one such phenomenon.

We begin in the Muslim world, in Tlemcen (Algeria). One of four young Christians there, part of a Focolare community present there since 1966, expressed the deep motivation that pushed him


27. For an ample and rigorous presentation of the interreligious engagement of the Focolare, see Roberto Catalano, Spiritualità di comunione e dialogo interreligioso: L’esperienza di Chiara Lubich e del Movimento dei Focolari (Rome: Città Nuova, 2010). More recently, the Centre for Interreligious Dialogue of the Focolare Movement (ed.), Chiara and the World Religions: Together towards the Unity of the Human Family (Conference Proceedings Castelgandolfo – Rome 17–20 March 2014). On that occasion the Focolare succeeded for the first time to bring together the various distinct “dialogues” with followers of the most important world religions, in one and the same meeting.
to enter into relationship, using language that refers to the gospel concept of love of neighbor. He wrote of the importance of “loving each person...with an attitude of welcoming, of listening, trying to recognize and understand a very different culture. Loving means welcoming what is positive in the other first of all.”

We noted that the actions of the Focolare members were rooted in one single desire or attitude, one which could be viewed as unconditional. It was an attitude which speaks strongly to a recognition of the inadequacy of the individual person alone, and thus the need for the other as *homo donator* – to whom the other felt indebted. On a sociological, and particularly on a relational level, what outcomes were generated by such an attitude of the individual within the framework and experience of interreligious dialogue?

The outcomes could be summarized in two seemingly contradictory macro-typologies. On one hand, diverse religious identities seem to be strengthened through such dialogue. A Muslim woman, after encountering the Focolare Movement, recounts:

Thanks to this movement, I am going ahead in my faith journey as a Muslim... I began to read the Koran with a heart and a vision full of love... We are not experiencing a mixture of religions, but instead these meetings reinforce each one in his or her religion.\(^{30}\)

Well-defined religious identities emerge as a result. At the same time, all parties are unconditionally open to accepting the other and her diversity. The words of an interreligiously mixed couple, in which the husband is a practicing Muslim and the wife a practicing Catholic, demonstrate this. When speaking of prayer, for example, the wife spoke of her husband’s support of her striving to live as a Christian, even while he himself remains Muslim: “We had each tried to learn a prayer of the other, but then it seemed more consistent to us if each of us were to remain him or herself. Bahaman was seen to very mature, offering several times to go to Mass with me.”\(^{31}\)

This couple’s relationship seems to be based on the diversity that each one bears, as if it were essential for each to reciprocally preserve the religious identity of the other in order to sustain their bond.

Another observed outcome was a clearer and increased awareness of a common belonging for members of a particular religion, making it possible then for a kind of integration or reciprocal belonging to emerge, along with an appreciation of the different identities.

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\(^{29}\) Cocchiaro, *Nel deserto fiorisce la fraternità*, 35. Thirty-seven years later, the words pronounced at the funeral of the same young man quoted above were uttered by the former prefect of Tiaret and Bedjaya (North of Algeria), Sidi Ahmed Benchouk: “You came to us and broke the sea of ice and destroyed the walls that separated us to build a bridge that will never disappear.” Quoted in Cocchiaro, *Nel deserto fiorisce la fraternità*, 14.

\(^{30}\) The dialogue between Focolare Christians and Focolare Muslims in Algeria, became a case study from a sociological perspective, presented at the international congress (June 2008) of sociologists organized by the international research group SocialOne, see: http://social-one.org/it/) and published as Bernhard Callebaut – Licia Paglione, “Il dialogo tra cristiani e musulmani in una comunità maghrebina”, in Vera Araújo, Silvia Cataldi, Gennaro Iorio, *L’amore al tempo della globalizzazione* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2015), 157–173.

As an example: A gospel phrase to be lived was identified each day as a guide during annual summer Focolare gatherings, including those that began during the 1980s in Algeria, with the participation of both Christians and Muslims. This prompted the Muslims present to propose a similar selection of a passage from their own scriptures that could be shared with the Christians. The effort to live such passages, and to share what each had lived, resulted in the creation of a new community, a new *sui generis* reality, using sociological terminology. The community was composed of Christians and Muslims, different but bound together as one spiritual family.

So it would seem the interreligious dialogue studied here represents a “case” in which interreligious relationships can hold the two opposing poles of identity and integration together, in a balanced, harmonious way. But how? What is the dynamic that permits such a relationship to emerge? The agents of different religions behaved with profound respect for one another, and without a desire to dominate. They do not have instrumental or strategic interests; they are unconditionally driven by a “desire for connection.” They discover an “indebtedness” to one another, as persons in need of the other, each with his or her own unique identity that is recognized as an essential element for the defining of their own collective identity.

This is the incentive that drives and sustains their actions. They are actions with seemingly “mixed motives” that are reflective of gift (interest in the other and in establishing a connection, yet capable of accepting and freely giving at the same time without expecting anything for oneself; obligation to love the other as a member of the same family, a “brother” or “sister,” but free to do so while remaining fully oneself). They are primarily animated by the unconditional logic contained in apparently paradoxical premise for the definition of religious identities. As Caillé would say, it implies the courage to make a “leap into the unknown” toward the other, to the point of running the risk of “losing,” in the sense of not making one’s own identity absolute.

But the resulting outcome is something else. It is the genesis of a kind of relationship where each one’s own identity is not lost. On the contrary, it is preserved, celebrated, and simultaneously linked to that of the others, thereby defining a common “place” of reciprocal belonging, with a vastness that exceeds that previously experienced. It is a place for “dialogical coexistence” resulting from the predominance of an “unconditional” logic in each agent’s behavior. Thus, this unconditional dimension reveals itself as a kind of “law” for social action, even in the interreligious field. It is capable of putting together the “fragments” based on a fuller, more integral picture of humanity.

**Dialogical convergences: from micro to macro perspective**

From a more macro perspective, we could ask: Does this growth in humanity pass now or in the future through a new axial age, one potentially comprised this time of new religious convergences instead of divergences? If we accept the idea that all axial religions share something fundamental that later developed along quite divergent pathways for each one, can we also imagine a new axial age today through globalization, an age where there is instead a more converging orientation in the relationship among religions?

A cautiously affirmative answer to this question is conceivable on the basis of the study presented here, as well as others that could also be presented. At the very least, this could be said with respect
to relationships among persons from different religions. In fact, the distinction between a dialogue among persons and a dialogue among religions is often made.

What is perhaps even more surprising are the many clear examples of an evolution in the relationship among religions and among various trains of religious thought already now. For example, we recall the image of Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi, together with Grand Imam el-Tayeb, rector of Cairo’s Sunni Islamic University Al-Ahza, signing the Document on Human Fraternity in front of 700 persons. Or we can think of the pope’s recent trip to Morocco as well. What can be done to ensure these signs do not remain as mere isolated cases?

How do the events of today differ from those of the prior axial age? What might bring religions to develop a more pluralistic converging orientation, while at the same time respecting religious diversity?

It is a matter of developing within each religious belief system that which leads to a new understanding of one’s own religion as a particular way of knowing God in order to understand and draw always closer to the Truth. Theologian Pietro Rossano expresses this very clearly from a Christian perspective when he says that the inexhaustible wealth of the Christian message cannot completely come to light until it is expressed in the categories of all religions.  

By religions taking the risk of “unconditionally opening up” and “dwelling in dialogue,” religious pluralism has begun to “converge,” not around the final goal of producing one single religion, but rather in jointly contributing to generating a more integral humanity.

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33. Piero Coda, L’amore è più grande del nostro cuore. Il dialogo interreligioso (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 2000), 76. Obviously, everybody expresses himself in the context of his own creed, but one can observe the effort to liberate from within a new understanding of the effectively ungiven situation in the following quote, from Rossano: “The character of interpersonal relationship peculiar to the Christian faith, a relationship that calls subjects to a new relationship with God and the brothers, in a way that transcends the trajectory of all the religions, because it is rooted in the mystery of the One Triune God, shared with mankind through Jesus Christ. This new relationship, far from destroying the pre-existing religious heritage, purifies and broadens it toward horizons never suspected before.” Original Italian: “il carattere di relazione interpersonale proprio della fede cristiana, una relazione che chiama i soggetti a un nuovo rapporto con Dio e i fratelli, in una forma che trascende l’orbita di tutte le religioni, perché ancorato sul mistero di Dio Unitrino, partecipato gli uomini in Gesù Cristo. Questo rapporto nuovo, lungi dal distruggere il patrimonio religioso preesistente, lo purifica e lo dilata verso orizzonti prima ignoti”), see Pietro Rossano, Il problema teologico delle religioni (Cinisello Balsamo: Paoline, 1975), 46.
charismatic currents.