

PROCEEDINGS E REPORT



# La Communauté de pratiques comme outil de dialogue interreligieux et interculturel

sous la direction de  
Silvia Guetta et Antonella Verdiani

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## CHAPITRE 5. THE RELATIONSHIP TO THE OTHER

*edited by Silvia Guetta*

### *Introduction*

The search for the significance of the Other presents one of the most interesting aspects of the interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The Other represents the interlocutor, the limit that we need to put to our being in order to permit the development of its human dimension. The religious traditions, in particular the monotheistic, have developed this relation with the other in different ways. For each of them the relation to the divinity, has meant the starting point of the possibility that is being given to the human being to define himself in a relational space the implies rules, respect, but also creation and possibility of choice. The Abrahamic religions (those that find their origin in the figure of Abraham) show us the Other divine just as the first interlocutor the one with whom occurs the exchange of the choice, the sharing of what has been done, the respect of rules. In its original form the Other always represents a necessity, the limit that determines and restricts us, the possibility itself for human survival.

The relation to the Other has its nature in human relationship, as a social and cultural, but also biological, need, because it is a guarantee for individual and collective survival. It is beyond any doubt that through the perspective of the relation with the divinity those social and cultural models have been structured that have regulated the relation to the Other. But if from one side the exchange and the dialogue have their origin in the birth of awareness of the living creature as human being, it is also true that in this relation it has been possible to generate also the seed itself of the exclusion and the denial of the Other. The exclusive relation with the 'chosen' divinity that is somehow recognised as exclusive, in some way superior to the others, generates the possibility to work per exclusion of the other if the other does not share the same divinity. In the closure of the 'superiority' that every religion tends to apply, there is the will to exclude, to push away, to demean. There where the Other is not recognised in every human being, the value itself of the exchange of the



dialogue and the acknowledgement is thus lost. And whereas the Other does not have its proper space in the human being, the relation remains outside, on the exterior of the inner *Self*. And this is what leads to considering the Other as different, as not alike, as the one that is characterized by that what prevents me from recognizing him as similar to myself.

From another point of view, every culture and every religion defines what are the ways, the contexts, the way of standing in front of the Other, the Other *we* and the Other *they* and only a clear awareness of what this refers to, may be an introduction to the dimension of dialogue and confrontation. The search for dialogue and confrontation has been felt in the religious world as a comprehension of coherence between the message of peace, respect of the other, common good and the acts and actions undertaken in name of the Divinity and religion itself<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, they all have used the experience of this relation as an instrument to understand the complex and dialectical human nature. Transversal element of different religious cultures the experience of the Other is an opening to the need of the meeting, the dialogue, the communication and the comprehension. But it also refers to the understanding of a social and cultural vision that goes deep into the sense of human nature its values and its meanings. The interreligious dialogue intertwines with the intercultural when both recognise each other as provokers of issues and transversal arguments that are the opening to continuous questionings and research.

This part of the book, even though it is not very extensive, stimulates interesting reflections on this subject. The first contribution invites us to think carefully about the way we see the Other in the African world. Reading Malinowsky again, the author shows us, through her experience as a tourist how to open new questionings and how to open a line of dialogue. The writer invites to read, in the look of the other, his history, his changes trying to understand the conflict and the conditions of life. This becomes more complex when we consider that many intercultural dynamics take place in social and cultural contexts that are external to the involved subjects. In this context the other is still seen as a subject to

<sup>1</sup> The need to start a dialogue between the religions, dates back to 1893, when in Chicago the spiritual delegations of the western and eastern world meet officially. It is the beginning of what nearly one century later will be defined as the World Parliament of Religions and that nowadays is recognised as one of the international contexts of the development of interreligious dialogue; <<http://www.parliamentofreligions.org>>. The Council for the formation of the World Parliament of Religions will be constituted almost one century later, in 1988, when a group of religious leaders, men of culture, scientists and representatives of the civil society of Chicago, meet in order to organise the celebration of the Centennial of the World Congress of Religions of 1893; in 1993 in Chicago the World Parliament of Religions that meets every 5 years in different cities of the world sees the light. The next meeting will be in Brussels in 2014.

be 'studied' to be helped, to be formed and not seen as a partner, because we are still inside our anthropological wish of an interpretation of reality.

The second contribution considers the empathic competence absolutely necessary for a relation of real exchange and an active communication with the other. Regarding the theme of empathy the discussion is rather extensive both for as much as the wide spread model of 'putting oneself in someone's shoes' and for as much as it is possible to educate empathically to empathy. The author explores the various aspects and the different problems of empathy noticing that it is sometimes easy to fall into contradictions because of a non correct use that can be made of empathy. Finally the writer invites to the consideration that the good practice consist in the being distinct and near but not distant and that in the relation with the other it means being open to him, and listen with an active and participative approach.

It is not necessary to use the instruments of emotional and cognitive decentralisation to be able to put oneself in someone else's shoes, but simply be open to the Other, listen, know how to express oneself through active listening, meaning, ask relevant questions, regardless of the answer, not intrusive, e above all making sure that the dialogue will also make use of imagination. The encounter between different mental representations may help to understand better the stereotypes and prejudices, but also to find original solutions to their problems. If it is clear that the presence of the Other is never something predictable something defined at start, a consideration that is only valid if I set the relation and the willpower to acquire the knowledge above the prejudice, in that case it becomes something original, something exploratory and innovatory.

A formational experience that produces change and new knowledge. The exchange generates other ideas, other knowledge, other emotions, thanks to the possibility that is being given to create a continuous tension between the having something to share and the original and unknown. The space to open a dialogue is also within this tension in addition to the will and the desire of understanding and discovering that particular dimension that is part of the person, whether near or far away, whether similar or different.

In the interreligious dialogue as well as in the intercultural, the relation with the Other has represented in these years, a constant commitment orientated towards overcoming obstacles, oppositions and stereotyped visions. A lot of projects of social and cooperative interventions are moving towards recognising the other not just as opposition or something different from what is inside me, but as a person to dialogue and cooperate with. A careful meditation about the open- mindedness and confrontation and thus about the need to create situations and spaces for dialogue, has started to get defined in a concrete manner in the years bridging the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Born out of necessity of the

civil society, in particular in the catholic religious world, the theme of the dialogue and the comparison with the other has drawn the attention of the political and institutional world, only in a subsequent moment. If we exclude particular contexts where new experiences of perceiving the Other have encountered and clashed, like that of the northern area of the Mediterranean<sup>2</sup>, that because of different motives, migratory, of conflict, of political changes has defined itself, at least in some social contexts the awareness of the necessity of the dialogue as possible answer to the phenomenon of tension, the consciousness of the importance of developing a new relation with the Other, has required time to be defined.

The fact that the first impulse to the necessity of dialogue and to change the prospect to see the Other in, is traceable within the religious world, above all the catholic one, has been amply acknowledged, that world that *having to deal with its proper past* has started, through the ecumenical movement, the process of reconciliation between the different churches. Therefore, the Christian world, in particular the catholic one, that more than any other felt the weight of not having recognised in the Other the presence of the divine, trying to subdue him and to submit him to its own truth, has felt the need to dialogue with the other churches and confessions<sup>3</sup>.

For as much as the research of a dialogue with the Other is an aspect that interests both the intercultural dimension and the interreligious, in the literature on the argument a direct exchange between these two areas of interest is not immediately apparent. Consequential to reading about anthropology and discipline, the intercultural practises have given little importance to the fertile and profound roots of the religious traditions and how these have, and still do, influenced and orientated both the way of seeing and the way of treating the other. Too often we tend to separate the cultural practices from the religious ones, loosing thus much of the dimensions of the hearing and the participation that characterize them. On the other hand the interreligious practices have wanted the task of talking about themes of spirituality and the divine, being kept circumscribed to men, intended exactly in the sense of males, without taking sufficiently into account the nature of their influence in the intercultural dialogue.

Further it needs thinking that the Other is always *a mixture* of Other, that he has a plural dimension, which recalls a complex reading of ways of behaviour, of ways of hearing and perceiving things. Thinking about the Other in a plural form, we are able to see its richness, its complexity, without putting limits to the relation. In practice, the encounter with

<sup>2</sup> C.C. Canta, M. Pepe, *Abitare il dialogo: società e culture dell'amicizia nel Mediterraneo*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2007.

<sup>3</sup> M. Raveri et al., *Verso l'altro. Le religioni, dal conflitto al dialogo*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2003.

the Other precedes the being with the Other. These are passages that are not automatic, that regard different aspects of the human being and may open up to the relation. The thoughts, the values, the emotions, the behaviour all enter at the same time in the space of encounter. The meeting with the other is not immediately acceptance. A moralistic and superficial education, may sustain this vision. We sustain that the encounter does not always lead to acceptance, sometimes even estrangement, separation, incomprehension may occur, due to the non recognising, or to other aspects of the profound that orientate our way of thinking, hearing and behaving ourselves in relation to people. We are not always aware that entering into relation with the Other, above all if we think that he belongs to another culture or another religion, can represent a discovery of ourselves. One of the aspects of flexibility of thought and of a complex representation of reality is exactly in the imagination and the thinking about ourselves as subjects that discover and enrich themselves in the experience with the others. Not always studies and research regarding the exchange and the reciprocal draw the attention to how we look at ourselves when we open up to the dialogue. Even if it is always mentioned, in an almost stereotype way, that the encounter with the Other, enriches us. It is not mentioned though that it is necessary that each person understands and recognizes in himself which are his capacities and availability for the change.

These considerations however may remain without much significance if we do not see them also in a decentred way. If we do not search which prospects, which representations, which necessities feed the exchange on the side of the Other or others and which are being brought into the space of encounter. Our need for encounter might be different, on the contrary very often it is, with regard to the one proposed by the Other, the expectations and the goals of the exchange are not known in advance. Very often one thinks to know or to be able to interpret the expectations or the needs of the other, but many times we are spoilt by our representation<sup>4</sup>. In our representations we include the image that we have created of the Other or others together with our expectations, our wishes and our ideals, above all when we are operating in the educational field. Whoever enters in the space of encounter does so carrying luggage of cultural reference, relational modalities, communicational and living competences, and existing knowledge that form the frame of reference of the social representations that we have.

<sup>4</sup> This aspect may be understood when we take a look at the attempt of approach of the parties in conflict. Each has a representation of reality, an expectation, and a goal that is different from the other. This risks, if in the encounter it is not included and mediated by the relation of mutual comprehension, to generate an estrangement rather than an approach.

In many educational contexts diversity is still not recognised, sometimes denied, often fought in the name of a presumed danger that the difference might harbour. When the Other, as a single and as a group enters in the atmosphere of the diversity, and is recognised as such also by its aspect, behaviour and non conformism, he or they can become the not tolerated, the excluded, the enemy. For a long time a culture has been transmitted that linked the different to the enemy. Many generations have studied in the books of history, how the Other as a single and a nation, could become a menace to the integrity or the security of their group. Many military conflicts base the construction of social knowledge, the acknowledgement of the Other, on fear, on defence of their security, on the menace of the integrity of their proper culture<sup>5</sup>.

The fear of the Other, the obsession with identity, the passion for a dangerous and often just imaginary pureness, are born from stereotypes, from incomprehension, from undergone and sometimes encouraged ignorance and, ultimately, laziness. The fear of the Other puts roots if the hope for life is absent; a person that has a brutal vision of realism, and that is not sustained by any confidence regarding the future, is led to see the Other as an instrument, or a menace and not an integration of the person<sup>6</sup>.

But the fear of the other combines well with and spreads in the economic crises of the globalisation, of the migratory dynamics that are accompanying the last decennials of the human history, and spur to find new answers for environmental sustainability as shared responsibility of all living creatures, because there is a clear awareness that the post modern and the technology do not solve 'in a magical' and a natural way the problems of living together of people and groups.

The social representations can be used as a good job to start the inter-religious and intercultural dialogue because they are an opening to the awareness and the complex vision of reality. The search for dialogue and the construction of a new way of social living, cannot be done by just using the instruments of reason, the force of cognitive intelligence. Just as in the relation to the Other the emotional dimension and the sense of perception is involved, it is also necessary that in the new relations of cooperation, collaboration, and living together in peace the sense of feeling<sup>7</sup> in the deepest and most constructive sense, is being involved.

<sup>5</sup> R. Toscano, *Il volto del nemico. La sfida dell'etica delle relazioni internazionali*, Guerini Associati, Milano, 2000; D. Bar Tal, Y. Teichman, *Stereotypes and prejudice in conflict: representations of Arabs in Israeli Jewish society*, University of Cambridge, UK, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> M. Raveri, *Verso l'altro*, cit., p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> P. Orefice, *I domini conoscitivi*, cit.

The education to intercultural and interreligious dialogue, if considered, like it is in particular in Italy, in the prospective of the ethno-cultural interpretation, meaning regarding the awareness of the diversities that characterize the social structure, it is above all concentrated on the construction of fields of experience that permit people to get to know each other, forming competences for the conscious development of curiosity, of listening, of staying together and of peaceful living together. But this imposition is no longer enough, the comprehension of the good social values does not guarantee their use and the presence of appropriate competences for their use.

Thus there is need to understand this relation to the Other anew through a new exploration of the models and the actions that sustain the educational system in the societies, the cultures and the religions. The relation to the Other is, like has been introduced here, charged with disputable relational dynamics, with risks of myth creating forms of good sentiments and peace, of stereotypes and cultural prejudices that become preliminary, of justification of procedures of exclusion, submission, exploitation to say it with a violent word. All this requires a continuous awareness of the engagement and the responsibilities that the educators in the first place need to educate to the culture of respect, to the culture of responsibility and to the culture of planetary peaceful living together.



## 5.1 ABOUT THE OTHER: NOTES ALONG A JOURNEY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Mariana Thieriot-Loisel<sup>1</sup>

Recently, during my journey in South African in March 2009, I discovered a book written by a very interesting journalist and photographer from Poland, who travelled all over the world, and particularly in Africa: Ryszard Kapuscinski. I bought the book in Cape Town and read it once while returning from Africa, and I warmly recommend it: *The Other* (Verso, London New York, 2008). I learnt that the author died quite recently, in 2007, and that this book was his last; it was translated after his death in 2008. I also read that a major part of his work was still in the process of being translated.

In his book, Kapuscinsky quotes very often the anthropologist Malinowsky and the philosopher Levinas. He speaks of the necessity of developing an anthropological view in journalism, and has a very interesting understanding of the concept of 'the other', and what he calls «My other». According to him:

At this point of a period of accelerated, increased migration had set in, when millions and millions of people moved to the cities, and that main stay of tradition, the village, was depopulated as its people was decimated by famine, civil war, droughts and epidemics. The person we meet and get to know in the big cities of the third world is already another Other – the product of an urban, hybrid culture, that is hard to define, the descendant of various contradictory worlds, a composite creature of fluid, impermanent contours and features. Nowadays is exactly this kind of other we are usually dealing with (p. 33).

Similar to the author, I too discovered, with the help of our tourist guide, the existence of the large Capetownian Township where about 2 million people are living; they seemed to me nearer and similar to the favelas of Sao Paulo, the township resembling the place where I taught

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. en Philosophie de l'Éducation. En études Post doctorales à L'Université Laval-Canada sous la direction du Prof. Dr. Thomas Dekoninck.



for several years in a University located in the suburbs. Those zones of poverty and despair near the urban centers are venues of violence, drugs market, corruption, and they are now a global phenomenon, which according to the author, tends to develop itself and spread all over. He describes «The archipelagos of all sorts of ghettos and camps spread about our planet» (p. 74) He also noticed as I did, observing the commercial relationship between the Chinese and South Africans that «a new other has been born»: a non-European who is 'other' in relation to another non-European. According to his observation, such relationships and exchanges are developing between people from Africa and Asia for example, or between people from Pacific Islands and the Caribbean. Trying to fully participate in the international dialogue and the world economic future, the author notes that:

The stranger, the other in his third world incarnation (and so the most numerous individual in our planet) is still treated as the object of research, but has not yet become our partner, jointly responsible for the fate of the planet on which we live (p. 61).

Explaining to us his desire for an anthropological interpretation of our world, he observes the important role played by the 'masses'. Thus, there is a mass culture and a mass hysteria, mass tastes (or rather lack of taste) and mass paranoia, mass enslavement and finally mass murder. The only hero on the world stage is the crowd, this mass, with its anonymity, its impersonality, lack of identity, lack of face. The individual is lost in the crowd, the mass had engulfed him, and the waters of the lake have closed over him. To use Gabriel Marcel's term, he has become «the nameless anonymous person in a fragmentary state.»

Returning to Canada after a 28-hour journey during which my husband and I had an uninterrupted flight of 20 hours and waited on 3 crowded airports, with a long stop in Holland. And I said to myself that this world has really nothing to do with a global village. I was simultaneously impacted by the amazing beauty of South Africa, and the crisis that is shaking the African continent, with the disappearance of the tribes' habitat and the end of the 'village' era and this new form of slavery in the poverty zones of the big cities and in its modern factories.

Malinowsky's problem was how to get close to the other if he is not a purely abstract creature, but a specific person, belonging to a different race, with his own beliefs and values that are different from ours, his own culture and customs. According to the author: «culture is becoming increasingly hybrid and heterogeneous» (p. 89). With regard to the expression «the global village» that he considers, as I do, as one of the greatest mistakes of modern culture, he comments: «the essence of a village depends on the fact that its inhabitants know each other well,

commune with each other and share a common fate. Meanwhile nothing of this kind can be said of our planet». In this sense «we are all in the same boat. Every one of us living on this planet is an Other in the view of Others» (p. 86).

My last impression of South Africa is that in order to understand a culture as Malinovsky says, you have to be there. And I was not there long enough. There are at least 6 languages spoken in South Africa, many tribes, different kinds of apartheid which is in fact a very ancient and European phenomenon, and as Nelson Mandela beautifully wrote: it is a «long walk for freedom». I was fascinated by this country, I miss South Africa somehow, as if a treasure was hidden there, that I wasn't able to find in the very heart of the people with whom we shared some time of our life, even if only for a few days.



## 5.2 EMPATHIE

*Emeline Calvez et Sana El Bizri<sup>1</sup>*

De nombreux spécialistes s'accordent à dire que pour avoir une bonne communication, il faut ressentir de l'empathie pour son interlocuteur, tout en gardant une certaine distance afin de ne pas trop s'impliquer dans ses états d'âmes et ne pas ressentir de pression émotionnelle.

Ceci est contradictoire car l'empathie induit l'affectivité, incompatible avec la notion de distance. En effet, l'empathie consiste à tenter de comprendre l'autre et ses schémas intellectuel et émotionnel comme si l'on était l'autre, en se mettant à sa place, ainsi on développe de l'affectivité pour l'interlocuteur, et ce par simple narcissisme. On croit se reconnaître dans l'autre et le comprendre, mais en vérité on est aveuglé par nos propres opinions et ressentis, et notre imaginaire aidant, on se crée une idée fausse du contexte et du ressenti de l'interlocuteur, ne percevant ainsi qu'une illusion («l'illusion du miroir») et n'adaptant pas le contenu de notre aide adéquatement. L'interlocuteur se sent incompris, cette affectivité l'étouffe et nous étouffe également, nous faisant ressentir comme un poids ce que l'autre est en train de vivre.

Si l'empathie et l'affectivité sont considérées comme des obstacles à la bonne communication, induisant une certaine fusion entre les deux interlocuteurs, la mise à distance en est également un. Être distant, c'est se mettre en rupture, se couper de son interlocuteur. Il en résulte donc le même problème qu'avec la fusion, au final, on ne voit plus son interlocuteur ! La bonne solution qui apparaît donc est de s'individualiser ! Être pleinement SOI face à quelqu'un à qui on accorde d'être pleinement LUI.

Un autre problème récurrent est la mauvaise différenciation entre affectivité et chaleur humaine. Les gens ne peuvent concevoir l'une sans l'autre, alors qu'elles n'ont rien à voir ! La chaleur humaine c'est être ouvert à l'autre sans avoir besoin de lui. L'affectivité c'est quand on a besoin ou peur de l'autre. Besoin de lui pour combler un de nos manques, pour nous rassurer. Peur de lui quand il risque d'aggraver un de nos manques

<sup>1</sup> Association d'éducation pour la paix «Blue Mission», Liban.

et de nous déstabiliser. La chaleur humaine réchauffe alors que l'affectivité étouffe, elle nous permet de rester proche et de supporter l'autre sans pour autant subir ses émotions.

La bonne pratique à poursuivre pour avoir une bonne communication est donc d'être distinct et proche, et non distant et fusionnel. Il ne faut en aucun cas se mettre à la place de l'autre mais simplement être ouvert à lui, l'écouter, l'aider à s'exprimer au moyen d'une écoute active, c'est-à-dire poser des questions pertinentes, sans conditions de réponse, non indiscretes, et surtout ne pas laisser son imaginaire et son émotivité prendre le dessus. L'imaginaire est très utile par contre pour aider la personne à trouver des solutions appropriées à ses problèmes.