

Colloquium “Milestones and stumbling stones in the current dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims”, Wednesday 28 October 2020, organised by the Christian weekly *Tertio*, the University Centre Saint-Ignatius Antwerp (UCSIA) and the Institute for Jewish Studies (IJS)

+ Johan Bonny, Bishop of Antwerp

The Dialogue Between Jews, Christians and Muslims in Antwerp

1. Antwerp and ‘the children of Abraham’

- Approximately 20.000 Jews, after New York, London and Jerusalem one of the biggest communities of mostly orthodox and Charedic Jews; concentrated in a few neighborhoods (next to the diamond district, near Lange Leemstraat);
- Approximately 120.00 Muslims in de region of Antwerp (20% population); more than half of the children in Islamic families have a diverse cultural background (mostly Morocco and Turkey); they live across the whole city region; are becoming the strongest religious current;
- Christians: ‘a majority of minorities’; a patchwork of communities; from all confessional (catholic, protestant, orthodox), from very diverse cultural and spiritual backgrounds; the ‘catholic church’ is a ‘catholic’ gathering from all four corners of the world.

2. What does this mean for a bishop?

- I move in an ‘extended family’ large ‘religious’ family (with ‘religious’ siblings (Catholics), half-brothers and half-sisters (ecumenism), cousins (Jewish and Muslim believers); they are no strangers but (blood) relatives!;
- I mostly interact with religious leaders (Jews: some leading Jewish persons from Antwerp, rarely rabbis; Islam: some leading imams); deficiency: I have almost no contact with Jewish or Muslim families (also through fault of my own);
- I am dialoguing with all of them, but not at the same time (bridge function);
- the other religions seek contact whenever a common approach is needed. (for example: Corona measures); then there is a smooth and fruitful deliberation, for example with the minister;
- exercise in modesty: all religions feature their own communication channels, political networks, diplomatic connection Often better and more efficient than mine!

3. I see similar questions and challenges in all communities

- the mutual dialogue and connection within each of these three communities: Jews, Muslims, Christians; in each group there are major differences in historical and cultural background, in language and value pattern, in faith interpretation and observance;
- with whom do believers from these communities establish or maintain contacts: with unrelated co-religionists here or with related co-religionists in their country of origin (for example: Jewish believer with Jewish relatives in New York, Muslim believer with Muslim relatives in Marrakesh; a Polish Catholic with Catholic relatives in Lublin); the conversation is there, but it does not create new connections here; the “digital age” encourages this non-integration (TV cable; internet; Whatsapp);
- poor knowledge or development of the Dutch language: there are groups, aids (TV, internet, digital,...) for interfaith conversation, but these have been developed in English or French; many conversations I have with Jewish or Muslim religious persons who live or work in Antwerp are conducted in English / French or with a translator; the “interfaith conversation” literally comes across as “strange” (an import theme);
- context of secularization: a new bath for all religions; all possible reactions ranging from “militant antithesis” to “quiet assimilation”; this fault line runs right through religions, neighborhoods, families; this also creates new relationships: for example between secularized Jews and secularized Catholics; between identitarian Muslims and identitarian Catholics.

4. I see places that are creating more connection than religions among themselves

- sports: during the World Championship of football in het wereldkampioenschap voetbal all support the Red Devils (on squares, in front of maxi screens...); the tribunes of Antwerp and Beerschot: the most important Christian-Muslim-atheist gatherings of the region; it is a place of “grace”!
- social life: the fireworks on new year’s eve along the Scheldt is an enthusiastic interreligious peak moment of shared joy and hope; restaurant NAPO (near MAS): three chefs collaborate in an ‘interreligious’ restaurant (Jew, Muslim, Coptic Christian) (advertising permitted);
- the school and the school gate: in Flanders, there are no real ‘confessional’ schools; all schools are open to all children (exception: Jewish schools exclusively for Jewish children); mothers meet each other at the school gate; all classes are given for all children together (all children in catholic school even get the same classes on religion); for children and young people, classmates of a different religion are self-evident;
- the workplace: in all sectors, Christians, Muslims and atheists interact; they talk about “real life” (family, health, home, money...);
- politics: political parties try to integrate Christians, atheists, Muslims and Jews on their electoral list (cf. the city council of Antwerp, the federal government in Brussels).

Some consequences:

1. partly because of this, there is a strong premise in the air: religion divides, life unites!
Do you want peace? Don’t Talk About Faith!
2. that should humble theologians and religious leaders: the “children of Abraham” get along better when their religious (and political) leaders are not there!
3. an open question: is it possible that this concerns the ‘depth-theology’, David Meyer where spoke off: *‘Theology in the books; depth-theology is in the hearts. The former is doctrine, the latter an event. Theologies divide; depth-theology unites.’* (David Meyer with reference to J. Heschel).
4. caution is advised in saying that ‘reception’ is a problem of *‘trickling down’* (cf. Etienne Vetö); that’s only half the problem; there is an equally serious problem of **‘trickling upwards’**; that is even more difficult given the ‘religious gravity!’ (N.B. just like in ecumenism).

5. Conversations between the ‘children of Abraham’

- tricky presupposition: what connects us is relevant, what distinguishes us is irrelevant; what distinguishes us is supposed to be known; what connects us, we must look for and work on together; but: what distinguishes us is even less known than that what unites us! Similarity and difference are both relevant: it is love that needs both (without ‘the other’ than myself an addition is possible, but no relationship is possible);
- I can relate to Felix Körner’s threefold division: face-to-face; side-by-side; back-to-back. There is homework that we must do together, and there is homework that every religion must do for itself. That homework is not only about what we think about ourselves, but also and especially about what we think about others (what *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 was / is for Catholics)
- very frustrating in theological conversation (both ecumenical and interreligious) I find the constant intersection of theological and non-theological factors. It is almost a ‘eschatological distinction’ that is ‘out of this world.’ And: there is always a new non-theological factor on the horizon! Specifically: the Jewish-Palestinian question, Islamic fundamentalism, Christian-Western capitalism; the macro-political blocs (such as the Middle East); the financial and economic markets; the sedimentation of old, lost cultures in our contemporary religion (e.g.: religions that come from the desert, with a tribal background; customs such as the slaughter of a lamb or not eating pork; rituals from times when there were no means of communication);
- the question remains: what is our relationship to ‘the nations’ (Etienne Vetö) (the non-Jews; the non-Muslims; the non-Christians)? Suppose they were present at our conversation: what would they think or understand about our conversation? what ‘message’ would they have from our conversation?; would our conversation bring them closer to God and His love for all people?; for whom does God intend our conversation?