

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

THE *SPIRIT OF ASSISI* AS A TOOL TO
FACE THE CORONAVIRUS
EMERGENCY: THE ROLE OF
INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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1. Introduction

One of the most iconic photos of interreligious dialogue in the time of Covid-19 was published by CNN on March 26, 2020 “Muslim and Jewish paramedics pause to pray together”. Jewish paramedic Avraham Mintz prays facing Jerusalem while Muslim paramedic Zoher Abu Jama prays facing Mecca, each as an individual but together in the same kind of action. In my opinion, this photo represents how religious differences can be overcome and transformed into a possible helpful tool to manage contemporary and global crisis, such as this pandemic is. Coronavirus Emergency has indiscriminately crossed national borders, regardless of a people’s religion or culture: but it has also inspired moments of interfaith unity, connecting believers (and non-believers) in the same battle. In this respect, interreligious dialogue seems actually to be a tool to face the Coronavirus Emergency, so much that even Wikipedia has made a page about it, which is constantly being updated¹.

During the Covid-19 Emergency, interreligious dialogue is favored because the global reply of different religious organizations to the Coronavirus pandemic has been that of similar regulatory actions, starting with the closure of the places of worship or the denial of access for the worshippers, then followed by the health and safety measures adopted during the celebrations including the attendance limit, the suspension of the collective meetings and the cancellation of large events. The Catholic religious authorities suspended the Sunday Mass and the Protestants their worship, just like the Islamic ones suspended their Friday prayers. The Mormons closed their temples and the Jews their synagogues. The Lourdes baths were closed and so were the Buddhist temples. All types of religious leaders got the infection and, without their knowledge, infected others. The method of diffusion of the measures to be taken has been similar, through websites or Twitter or official pages on Facebook. And this occurs all around the world, no matter what the religion or cult. I am speaking, of

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_on_religion.

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course, on a broad level. We do keep in perspective that the self-executing “degree” of the religious rules can be different in each context².

2. *The definition of Interreligious Dialogue and its geopolitical role*

The World Council of Churches distinguishes three different meanings connected to the generic expression *interreligious dialogue* commonly considered as the dialogue between religions. According to this institution, “ecumenical dialogue” concerns only Christian denominations, “interfaith dialogue” involves Abrahamic faiths - such as the Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions – and “interreligious dialogue” means relations between different religions³. Peter Colwell distinguishes as well between “interfaith” as a “political concept of the public square”, and “interreligious” relations as an “understanding of how the church engages with the religious other, both in terms of actual dialogue and also Christian self-understanding in its encounter with religious plurality”⁴. These definitions can be justly considered from traditional religious perspectives⁵, but they do not work in the legal arena, which defines the “interreligious dialogue” in a wider sense, both globally and interreligiously, canceling the technical nuances adopted by the specialists of religious studies⁶.

Moreover, we must consider that to allow the inclusion of atheists, agnostics, humanists and other ethical or philosophical beliefs in this context - as well as to be more accurate concerning the many world religions that are different from Western religions - some scholars prefer to use the terms “interbelief dialogue” or “interpath dialogue”⁷. Although interreligious dialogue is different from the dialogue between

² Cf. L. M. Guzzo, *Law and Religion during (and after) Covid-19 Emergency: the Law is made for Man not Man for Law*, in P. Consorti (ed.), *Law, Religion and Covid-19 Emergency*, DiReSoM, Pisa, 2020, pp. 19-27.

³ World Council of the Churches – Central Committee, *Ecumenical considerations for dialogue and relations with people of other religions*, Papers, 2004, in <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/ecumenical-considerations-for-dialogue-and-relations-with-people-of-other-religions>. See also G. Silvestre, *Percorsi per un dialogo ecumenico e interreligioso*, Editoriale Progetto 2000, Cosenza, 2012.

⁴ P. Colwell, *From Interfaith to Inter-Religious: Describing the new Post Inter Faith Context*, in *Churches Together*, p. 7, <https://ctbi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/From-Interfaith-to-Inter-Religious-Describing-the-new-Post-Inter-Faith-Context.pdf>.

⁵ Cf. S. Morandini, *Teologia dell'ecumenismo*, EDB, Bologna, 2018.

⁶ See also, in an ecumenical perspective, N. Doe, *Christian Law. Contemporary Principles*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015.

⁷ Cf. S. Peleg (ed.), *Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogues for Global Peacebuilding and Stability*, IGI Global, Hershey PA, 2019.

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believers and non-believers, the latter is very important too⁸, and it is actually a “secular challenge”⁹.

By our side, even law scholars take on different meanings of interreligious dialogue, so perhaps we can disregard these technicalities to consider the heart of the question: interreligious dialogue has reached an evident geopolitical role as a peace-building function, and not only for the governance of religion¹⁰. As Pierluigi Consorti has written: interreligious dialogue “started as a religious matter, but nowadays it is also a political issue”¹¹; political role means also geopolitical role¹², able to affect in international law processes¹³. This geopolitical impact is well synthesized in Hans Küng’s incisive formula: “no peace among the nations without peace among the religions; no peace among the religions without dialogue among religions”¹⁴. Let us not forget that according to the art. 17.3 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Union “shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue” with the churches and the religious associations, and with the philosophical and non-confessional organizations¹⁵. In the Europea, this rule encouraged both the dialogue among the various religious denominations (or non-confessional organisations) themselves and between them and the public authorities¹⁶.

According to Paolo Naso, the geopolitical role of interreligious dialogue has an icon in the Assisi meeting of October 27, 1986 strongly desired by Pope John Paul II. “The icon of Assisi, well beyond its core meaning, made the potential role of religions in the geopolitical scene clear, denouncing on the one hand the exploitation of radicalism, and on the other indicating a strategy of dialogue, and therefore of possible interreligious coexistence”¹⁷. In this geopolitical dimension, we could take as a basic definition of interreligious dialogue the positive cooperation between people of different religious traditions, at both the individual and institutional level.

3. How useful has interreligious dialogue been as a tool in facing Coronavirus Emergency?

⁸ P. Consorti, P. Scoppola (ed.), *Fede religiosa e fede laica in dialogo*, Guerini e associati, Milano, 2007; R. Dworkin, *Religion without God*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) – London (EN), 2013.

⁹ Cf. P. Consorti, *Inter-religious dialogue: a secular challenge*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, June 2007, p. 3.

¹⁰ M. Giera, A-K Nagel, *Interreligious relations and governance of religion in Europe: Introduction*, in *Social Compass*, n. 3/2018, pp. 301-311.

¹¹ P. Consorti, *Inter-religious dialogue...*, cit., p. 3.

¹² See P. Ferrara, *Religioni e relazioni internazionali*, Città Nuova, Rome, 2014.

¹³ Cf. P. Lillo, *Globalizzazione del diritto e fenomeno religioso*, Giappichelli, Torino, 2012, pp. 166 ff.

¹⁴ Cf. H. Küng, *Islam. Passato, presente e futuro*, BUR, Milano, 2005, p. 5.

¹⁵ See S. Montesano, *Brevi riflessioni sull'art. 17 TFUE e sul progetto di Direttiva del Consiglio recante disposizioni in materia di divieto di discriminazione*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, n. 18/2005, 20 ff.; D. Durisotto, *Unione europea, chiese e organizzazioni filosofiche non confessionali (art. 17 TFUE)*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, n. 23/2016.

¹⁶ A. Mantineo, *Verso nuove prospettive del pluralismo religioso nel Magistero della Chiesa cattolica?*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, July 2011, p. 29.

¹⁷ P. Naso, *The civil dimension of interreligious dialogue*, in *libertàcivili*, n. 5/2017, p. 30.

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The use of interreligious dialogue as a tool to combat infection from Coronavirus means that religions have found themselves organizing shared moments of prayer. There was the meeting promoted by the international non-governmental organization "Religions for Peace", on March 13, 2020, in which thirteen religious leaders gathered virtually together to pray for hope and solidarity. Similarly, there has been the day of faith and interreligious prayer organized on May 14, 2020 by the High Committee for Human Brotherhood to ask the one god to free humanity from pandemic¹⁸, inspired by the Abu Dhabi document¹⁹ (and also by the Declaration of Solidarity from the New Alliance of Virtues²⁰).

On October the 20th in Rome was held the International Meeting of Prayer for Peace "No one is saved alone. Peace and fraternity". The leaders of all religions – well masked to protect against the virus - gathered in "the spirit of Assisi", and spiritually united to believers worldwide and to all men and women of good will, prayed alongside one another to invoke upon the world the gift of peace. In the final Appeal the religious leaders turned to the political ones asking them: "let us work together to create a new architecture of peace. Let us join forces to promote life, health, education and peace. The time has come to divert the resources employed in producing ever more destructive and deadly weapons to choosing life and to caring for humanity and our common home. Let us waste no time! Let us start with achievable goals: may we immediately unite our efforts to contain the spread of the virus until there is a vaccine that is suitable and available to all. The pandemic is reminding us that we are blood brothers and sisters"²¹. This leader religions' strong appeal to fraternity and social friendship, also as a tool to face Coronavirus Emergency, is in the core of Francis' third Encyclical Letter "Fratelli tutti" (2020)²².

Furthermore, interreligious dialogue has also inspired occasions of solidarity in practical activities²³, such as in Pakistan where Muslim volunteers have sanitized not only mosques but also churches and synagogues, as well as distributing food and other necessities to Muslims, Jews and Christians alike.

¹⁸ M. Lo Giacco, *Fraternity. A Proposal From Religions to States to Overcome the Covid-19 Emergency*, in *DiReSoM Papers*, May 20th 2020 (<https://DiReSoM.net/2020/05/20/fraternity-a-proposal-from-religions-to-states-to-overcome-the-covid-19-emergency/>).

¹⁹ Francesco - Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, *Documento sulla Fratellanza umana per la pace mondiale e la convivenza comune*, Abu Dhabi, February 4th 2019, in http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.

²⁰ Cfr. A. Fuccillo, *The "Charter of the New Alliance of Virtue" facing the Covid-19 Emergency*, in *DiReSoM Papers*, 11 maggio 2020 (<https://DiReSoM.net/2020/05/11/the-charter-of-the-new-alliance-of-virtue-facing-the-covid-19-emergency/>).

²¹ *Appeal for Peace 2020*, October 20, 2020, in <https://preghieraperlapace.santegidio.org/pageID/31256/langID/en/text/3628/APPEAL-FOR-PEACE-2020.html>

²² Francis, *Fratelli tutti on the Fraternity and Social Friendship*, Assisi, October 3rd 2020, in http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

²³ V. Fronzoni, *From Social Distance to Muslim Solidarity Proximity at the Time of Covid-19*, in P. Consorti (ed.), *Law, Religion and Covid-19 Emergency*, DiReSoM, Pisa 2020, pp. 141 ff.

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Interreligious dialogue also acts an effective protection of religious freedom in a pluralistic society, such as in Italy or in France²⁴. The Catholic Church and the public authorities quickly agreed a bilateral solution for the return to religious celebrations in safety in the so called “phase 2”. Meanwhile, at the Ministry of the Interior, the head of Civil Liberties and Immigration Department, Michele di Bari, set up round table discussions with the representatives of the other religious denominations, including those that have not signed the *Intese* (agreements) provided for by article 8.3 of the Italian Constitution, leading to an unprecedented regulatory solution built on dialogue²⁵. Thanks to interreligious dialogue a new season has been inaugurated in the relationships between religions and the state²⁶. Especially, I would like to dwell on the role that interreligious dialogue has assumed as a method of safeguarding freedom of religion in state systems by referring to the health protocols signed in Italy between the Government and the representatives of the various confessions²⁷, to facilitate the exercise of religious services²⁸.

In other words, interreligious dialogue has been an instrument for the protection of freedom of religion in civil systems. Instead of being only a relationship between religious groups, it is also a method through which these same groups can treat with secular power, in their autonomy and independence. I would say that we are probably facing a turning point in the history of relations between the State and religious denominations.

²⁴ Cf. M. C. Ivaldi, *La via francese alla limitazione delle libertà e il dialogo con le religioni al tempo del Coronavirus*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, n. 1/2020.

²⁵ P. Consorti - L. M. Guzzo, *Stato e religioni: il dialogo è metodo*, in *Il Regno-blog*, May 8th 2020; P. Consorti-L. M. Guzzo, *Riprendono anche i riti non cattolici. Per la prima volta accordi con Islamici e confessioni senza intesa*, in *DiReSoM Papers* (www.DiReSoM.net), May 16th 2020

²⁶ M. Lo Giacco, *I “Protocolli per la ripresa delle celebrazioni delle confessioni diverse dalla cattolica”: una nuova stagione nella politica ecclesiastica italiana*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, n. 12/2020. See also L. Decimo, *La “stagione” dei protocolli sanitari tra Stato e confessioni religiose*, in *Oliv*, May 14th 2020.

²⁷ Cf. G. Macrì, *Brevi considerazioni in materia di governance delle pratiche di culto tra istanze egualitarie, soluzioni compiacenti e protocolli (quasi) “fotocopia”*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, n. 11/2020, pp. 68-96. L. M. Guzzo, *Coronavirus, politica ecclesiastica e protocolli sanitari: dalla bilateralità pattizia alla multilateralità estesa*, in *Ordines*, n. 1/2020, pp. 313-329. Cf. also A. Tira, *Libertà di culto ed emergenza sanitaria: il protocollo del 7 maggio 2020 concordato tra Ministero dell’Interno e Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, in *Giustizia insieme*, May 16th 2020; A. Tira, *Normativa emergenziale ed esercizio pubblico del culto. Dai protocolli con le confessioni diverse dalla cattolica alla legge 22 maggio 2020, n. 35*, in *Giustizia insieme*, June 8th 2020.

²⁸ S. Berlingò, G. Casuscelli, *Diritto ecclesiastico italiano. I fondamenti. Legge e religione nell’ordinamento e nella società d’oggi*, Giappichelli, Torino, 2020, pp. 90-100.