JEAN DUJARDIN

Paths of Peace: A Challenge to the Three Monotheistic Religions

In order that our traditions may open up ways of peace, it is absolutely necessary that they begin by examining the challenges that they face today. These challenges belong in part to the past, but that is not a reason for minimizing their importance for they remain present in our consciousness, in the most widespread received opinion. They reinforce the deeply rooted idea that religions have been and still are factors of war rather than factors of peace. Certain contemporary events continue to give credence to this view. And what has been called the return to center stage of the phenomenon of religion, whatever its real depth, runs the risk, on account of the identity factor involved, of being called upon to justify conflicts whose true motivations are less openly avowable.

I shall leave aside the question of the primeval causes of violence analyzed so well by Professor Williams on the basis of the research of René Girard. I lack sufficient competence to discuss their relevance. I will take rather as my starting point the analysis made by the late Father Paul Beauchamp, professor of Exegesis at the Jesuit Faculty in Paris, of the Biblical recognition of the existence of a universal primeval violence.1 He does so starting with the Old Testament, but he warns from the outset, in the face of a widely held Christian view, that this violence continues to be present in the New Testament. It is impossible to accept the historical perspective of a moral progress beginning with an archaic violence present in the Old Testament and ending with an era of meekness and peace to which the New Testament supposedly bears witness. This simplified vision, incidentally, renders even more unacceptable the violence displayed throughout the history of the Christian Churches. It distorts from the outset the truth of the dialogue between Jews and Christians.
In regard to the Old Testament, Father Beauchamp makes it clear that there are forms of individual violence which God condemns. Violence between brothers, as in the case of Cain and Abel, violence born of desire and the will to power, as in the case of David and Uriah. He recalls the various forms of social violence, those of Pharaoh against the Hebrew people in Egypt, those condemned by the prophets. But he does not conceal those forms of violence that history attributes to religious motives, those committed in obedience to the will of God. Forms of violence that pose problems for the ordinary reader of the Bible, whether he be a believer or not. Far from brushing them aside as unfortunate remnants of a primitive moral state, Father Beauchamp states that “we must let the scandal of the Bible and of its own violence speak freely. Our task is neither to attack it nor to ‘defend’ it, and even less to excuse it on the grounds of it belonging to a bygone age and a distant culture.” And that all the more so, he adds, “since violence is not absent from the history of Jesus.”

How indeed could it be otherwise, since God himself is affected by it, before the flood (Gen 6:5-7). The Covenant of the new creation concluded with Noah does not wipe out this violence. Through the laws given to Noah, the Lord does not deny it, he endeavors to contain it. One would need, but it is not my intention here, to retrace the “search for man” carried out by God, to borrow the expression of Abraham Heschel, in order to channel and orientate the lives of men towards peace. As a Christian, as a believer in Christ our Peace, I recognize that violence has not been eradicated by the salvation that he brings. I believe that, through the unconditional pardon which Jesus proclaims, he introduces into the balance that justice always demands an “excess” capable of overcoming violence. But opening up the paths of peace requires a struggle which Christ has inaugurated. Hence the vigilance which is necessary. It is our responsibility, as members of the monotheistic religions, to be fully aware of its expressions and to attempt to eradicate them by reflecting on their causes. For that reason, I continue to recall the warning given by Father Beauchamp: “The great weapon of violence lies in its dissimulation.”

I am going to succinctly develop my analysis along four lines, simply underlining the essential points: 1) There is a need to be fully conscious of history and the evils it displays, to be aware of the questions which it poses because there is no consciousness without memory; 2) Can the reading of the Bible protect us against violence? If so, under
what conditions? 3) There is a need for each of us to undergo a conversion; and 4) Interreligious dialogue can be a pathway to conversion.

The Weight of History and the Questions it Poses

Three kinds of historical events must be recalled to mind because they burden memories and distort our relationships. The crusades were wars waged in the name of the faith, even if they were inspired by other motives. Innumerable forms of violence, torture and execution were decreed by the tribunals of the Inquisition in the name of truth, in the struggle against what Christians considered to be heresies. Wars were waged between different Christian confessions from the sixteenth century onwards in the perspective of the same struggle for truth.

When one studies these events solely from the point of view of history, it is normal to seek to explain the acts perpetrated, for the task of the historian is essentially one of understanding, without at the same time judging the consciences of those who thus acted. But Catholic moral theology as it has developed over the centuries cannot remain simply at that point, for it calls upon us to discern the objective nature of faults not only in function of the circumstances but in relation to the Word of God of which it aims to be the guardian, in particular in relation to the second commandment concerning love of one's neighbor. We must therefore, ask ourselves if we do not wish to fall into the same errant ways, how such deviant forms of behavior have been possible. I would like to quote here the pertinent challenge issued by Professor Denis Charbit of the University of Tel Aviv, at Clermont-Ferrand on the occasion of the commemoration of the 900th anniversary of the Council of Clermont, the starting point of the first crusade. He issued his challenge in the context also of the painful memory of the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin:

Are we not in a situation in which believers of all the monotheistic religions...say to themselves “Since God exists, everything is permitted me?” In other words, because a believer claims to be sent by God...to be the one who understands him better than anyone else, he claims for himself the right to take another man’s life. Even if I understand the view that sees in murder committed in the name of God a perversion, a cari-
cature, and if I judge that nothing is more intolerable than to hear people using their faith to justify killing, the doing of evil, I ask myself and I ask you the question: rather than simply wishing to preserve the coherence and integrity of the religious message of each of us, should we not, each and every one of us, in regard to our faith, examine our consciences and ask ourselves: "What is there in my faith and my religious practice which can tolerate such a degree of deviance, such a gap, whether we call it by the name of crusade, or inquisition, or religious fanaticism on the Jewish as on the Muslim side?" To exclaim that it is a false Judaism, that Judaism is pure, is to wash one's hands of all responsibility. . . . If on the other hand, we reflect on those aspects, which in each of the three religions lay themselves open to such admittedly perverse interpretations, there would then be a real gain in awareness. Let each and every one of us search in the depths of his faith and his personal history. . . . Rather than attempting at all cost to save everything, to preserve everything en bloc, I wonder if it is not better, out of pedagogical and ethical concern, to drive away the ambiguities wherever they may come from.²

I hear this question resounding in the depths of my own faith, over and beyond the recognized examples of both individual and collective sin. It seems to me that Professor Charbit is asking a fundamental, primordial question. When I read, when I listen to the Word of God, what do I listen to, what do I receive? The Bible, as I stated in my introduction, presents us with violence in all its forms, and at the same time it gives us the means to combat them. How does it come about that we hear it in such a selective fashion? Hear it or not hear it?

Reading Our Scriptures: Problems of Hermeneutics, Problems of Tradition

The problem is above all that of listening to the Word, which is not selective, dictated by our own interests. The problem is that of hearing the whole of the Word. To illustrate my point, I should like to recall to mind here that this is historically the experience of Christians in relation to the Jewish people. What did the Second Vatican Council do but
reopen the way to a more complete listening to the Word of God? In that case, the fundamental question that presents itself to us is that of hermeneutics, not only as a science belonging to specialists, but as the expression of the living tradition of our communities. But the question is even more one of asking ourselves who possesses the authority to interpret this Word in such a way that the understanding of believers may avoid the traps of a reductivist interpretation that justifies deviant forms of behavior. This is quite obviously linked to the conception that each of our traditions holds concerning its relationship to its foundational texts, and I am fully aware that our different religious confessions approach this question in different ways. That is why it is not only useful but urgent that we be able to explain our points of view and recognize our differences. This should be one of the primary themes of inter-religious dialogue.

Prayer for Peace and the Necessary Conversion

While waiting for such a path to open up, however, the present situation indicates clearly the need for a conversion. Cardinal Etchegaray, at a conference held at the University of Nice Sophia-Antipolis on December 13-14, 1990, expressed his conviction that every religion carries in its own innermost being a desire for peace: "An authentic and above all authentically lived religion bears within its essence seeds of peace," he said. "Every religion according to its own peculiar genius, when it draws upon its foundational texts and inner inspirations, its purest motives and energies, opens up a path of peace." But is such a going back to sources possible without a conversion? In this sense, I believe in the necessity of the steps taken in this direction by religious leaders, for they alone can open up the way for the faithful.

I rejoice in those undertaken by the Church of which I am a member on the occasion of the Jubilee of the year 2000. They were for the Catholic faithful the opportunity for a rediscovery of the in-depth meaning of the Jubilee. But I cannot remain content with such acts, nor a fortiori set myself up as judge over them. For the steps taken by religious leaders are one thing, the understanding that the faithful may have with regard to them is another. Much remains to be done. We must work towards this conversion becoming the personal conversion of each of us. I believe that we must situate it in its true place, which
is at the heart of prayer. Prayer is, *par excellence*, its true place, for if it is true, it cannot remain cut off from the events of the world and the way in which men behave therein. When these events disturb us, when we feel overwhelmed by them, we turn to God. It is understandable that we should ask him to grant to men a peace, which they seem incapable of creating. But do we change events through prayer? Such was the question posed by a Catholic priest a few years ago in a meditation addressed to university teachers concerned by the tensions of their age. He added:

Certainly yes. The promise of the Lord is the strength of prayer, it is always answered. But in the midst of this efficacy perceived in hope, prayer exercises another kind of mediation upon events. To pray, in fact, is not to cry out towards a being unknown, wielding an arbitrary power, whose inexplicable will forces itself upon us in the manner of a decree...it is pursuing a conversation which God himself has begun, he has spoken, He has revealed himself in his Word, and this Word illuminates and judges everything that occurs, but we have to discover little by little what is the light that emanates from him, which is cast upon events and things...Events are not thereby explained, but they are situated, and what we perceive is that understanding of the ways of God passes via the path of conversion. Through prayer, we become other: prayer changes the world, because it changes men.5

Such is a penetrating question: does prayer change us? In what, and in what direction? We must believe so, but for that several conditions are required. Who is the God to whom we pray? Are we his servants, or do we make him subservient to our ideas and our actions? If so, then transcendence is “placed in captivity,”6 and God is no more than an idol. Yet, once we have placed ourselves in a correct position before him who remains the Wholly Other, do we hear the questions that he asks us concerning our brothers? Let us recall God’s question to Cain: “Where is your brother Abel?” (Genesis 4: 9), and in an analogous sense the teaching of Jesus: “When you go to present your offering at the altar, if then you remember that your brother holds a grudge against you, leave your offering there and go and be reconciled with your brother” (Matthew 5: 23-24).
The truth of our relationship with God demands that we reflect in
depth upon the events which affect us and which affect the lives of peo-
ple, our siblings. This quest cannot be carried out except by taking into
account the demands of truth and justice, not only according to our
inclinations, our passions and our feelings and, I would dare say, address-
ing myself to Christians, mistrusting a self-complacent charity which
would ignore the demands of truth and justice. True prayer demands, at
the deepest level of ourselves, if struggle seems unavoidable, that we
remain workers for peace. According to Psalm 37: 8-11, and according
to the Beatitude of Matthew 5:4 which picks up its meaning, it is the
meek who will inherit the earth and not the violent. The truth of our
attitude before God must lead us to the forgiveness of which God is the
source. In the face of world events, that may seem derisory, and yet
when we look at the deep divisions affecting our societies, we discover
the limits of all the means dreamed up by men in order to re-establish,
over and above the absence of war, peace in men’s hearts, the reconcili-
ation of minds. The founding fathers of a united Europe, who were
believers, knew that well. That is why they foresaw the need for Franco-
German reconciliation after so many years of hatred, by being in a very
concrete way workers for peace.

Interreligious Dialogue As a Pathway
to Conversion of Minds and Hearts in Search of Peace

It is possible that, in this particular sphere, the appeals we make
may neither be identical nor immediately convergent. That is why dia-
logue between us is more urgent than ever. It is absolutely necessary
because “in spite of attempts at dialogue and rapprochement, tension still
persists between these three religions and this latent tension can give
rise, amongst peoples, to discriminatory attitudes, can even be the
source of sporadic acts of violence.” In this particular area, because dia-
logue is often inflamed by passion and involves the concrete life of our
communities, that dialogue is confronted by the problem of the true
representation of the other. “I suggest,” writes Professor Frémiaux, “that
the real issue does not lie in the content of the two Biblical (and
Gospel) revelations [yet the hermeneutical problem raised here is fully
relevant]...It lies rather in the individual and social representations of
which these revelations furnish a prop and a justification, to the point
of creating the feeling, among the adherents of one or other of the two
confessions, that they belong to two totally irreconcilable camps.”

Whence the necessity of a deeper knowledge of the other’s mind,
“as he understands himself,” to borrow the expression employed by the
Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism, ten years
after Nostra Aetate. Such a work of understanding does not in itself call
into question our deepest beliefs, nor does it aim at a cheap synthesis
which cannot in the long run satisfy anyone, but it can lead to a
demanding purification of our ideas through a questioning to which a
better knowledge of the other must inevitably give rise.

I have spoken of the truth of our attitude towards God; I am not
forgetting that it is verified, so to speak, by our attitude towards our
brothers. That is why it has a bearing upon the manner in which dia-
logue is conducted. St. John, taking up the link between the first and
second commandments, formulated it in a striking manner: “He who
says he loves God and does not love his brother is a liar, for how can he
say that he loves God whom he cannot see if he does not love his broth-
er whom he sees?” (1 John 4: 20) We are reminded of this truth in rela-
tionships not only in the context of judging our behavior, but it applies
also to the quest for truth. In our relationship with God, in the manner
in which we conceive of that relationship, we have also to hear the
questions of our brother. True, we are all convinced that we possess the
truth. It is not a case of asking us to call into question this certainty. But
what is our relationship to truth? Is it a relationship of possession or a
relationship of service, a relationship of instrumentalism or a relation-
ship of witness? To choose dialogue, with the demands it imposes, is, I
believe, to open up paths of peace.

Notes

2. Ninth Centenary, Council of Clermont – First Crusade. Papers
presented at the official conference organized by the Diocese of
3. For an approach to these difficult questions, the following works in
French are useful: Thomas Römer, Dieu obscur, Labor et Fides,
1996; Paul Beauchamp, “Violence et Bible: la prière contre les


6. Religions et guerres, op. cit., p. 28.

7. Religions et guerres, op. cit., p. 29.

8. Religions et guerres, op. cit., p. 188.