

Rethinking Universality.

A condition for a true Interreligious Dialogue in a Pluralistic Age

Adriano Fabris

1. *Introduction*

In my speech I will discuss three aspects that concern and promote, in my opinion, the development of an idea of “welcoming Church”.

In the first place, I will try to describe some aspects of today’s religious life in the Western World. Once again, three points must be emphasized in this context: religious pluralism, fundamentalism and religious indifference.

Secondly, I will attempt to outline the conditions which might open the way for a true dialogue in the pluralistic situation we are experiencing now. In relation to this aim, it is necessary to define a specific concept of “identity”: an “open” identity.

Lastly, I will develop, from a philosophical viewpoint, an idea of universality which can support and foster interreligious dialogue. This idea must overcome the traditional, fixed notion of “universality” and move in the direction of a progressive “universalizability”.

My final thesis is that a “welcoming Church”, an “open Church” can help us to define the identity of our contemporary religious communities; it can help us to bear witness to faith, develop a true form of communicating faith and share a common engagement against violence.

2. *Plurality vs. pluralism*

What we are undergoing today in the globalized West is an experience that has only rarely been available in the past. We are witnessing an effective coexistence of various cults and rituals, faiths and

beliefs. The elements that were kept apart in the past by the barriers of space and time – a fact which entailed the identification of a specific religion with a precise territory of with a determinate period – are now intermingled within the same sphere. A *plurality of religions* is present in the same public sphere (see f. e. Casanova, 1994, Joas, 2014).

Nevertheless, it is mainly about *religious pluralism*, and not plurality, that we talk about nowadays. This expression refers not only to the description of a fact, but also to the solution of the problem this fact presents us with. Indeed, this expression does not merely foreground the fact that many religious cults coexist side by side within the same environment and, therefore, that it is necessary to peacefully manage their coexistence. Rather, the use to which the term “pluralism” is put seems to indicate that plurality in religious experience is a good thing, that it might be seen as the solution of the conflicts arising nowadays precisely because of the simultaneous presence of many religions within the same territory. What counts is that there be some tolerance.

These ideas are constantly being repeated by the *mass media*. According to some commentators it is better to have many religions rather than just one. A disarticulated multiplicity is better than a monolithic unity. Therefore: conflicts can be avoided only if we attach a value to a point of fact, i.e. only if we transform the plurality of religions into the ideological thesis of pluralism. It’s a pity that this idea is usually promoted by lay people and not by believers.

3. *Fundamentalism*

The believer, every believer, is in fact convinced that his faith represents the only way to deliverance. And he is quite right: otherwise he would change his religion. But does this mean that – since his is the only true religion – all the other faiths and all the other religions must be undervalued if not even fought and eliminated? What opens up here is the possibility of another misunderstanding. After the failure to distinguish between plurality as a fact and pluralism as a value, we plunge into the confusion between religious faith and religious fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism does not correspond to faith. Rather, it is a tendency which can be found not only within every religious field but also within some non-religious conceptions. Fundamentalism is a partial, unilateral

way of expressing one's ideas by emphasizing some of their aspects and taking them to extremes. It is a way of expressing one's convictions in an intransigent, self-referential, exclusive and excluding way (Riesebrodt, 2001; Ruthven, 2007).

This is the reason why the fundamentalist rejects the dialogue and the encounter with people who profess different ideas: having reached true faith, he thinks that he does not need anything else. Of course, this might be a reaction to religious pluralism.

And yet, by denying the productiveness of every relation other than the fixed and closed relation with his own God the fundamentalist denies, as a point of fact, the self-same essence of religion. He denies the fact that, as indicated by the etymology of the word, "religion" means relation (*religamen*), an open and productive relation with God, with the other human beings, with creation (Lactantius, 2004, IV, 28).

But how does fundamentalism arise? Or better, what does generate the mentality that produces it? What is its genesis and, above all – putting the word into inverted commas – its "logic"?

Fundamentalism, religious fundamentalism in this case, instantly identifies particularity and universality, contingency and absoluteness. This is its fundamental mistake. Religion is, in point of fact, a relation between these two spheres – between the particular and the universal, between the contingent and the absolute, between the human and the divine – and there are innumerable ways in which this relation has been realized throughout history. On the contrary, the fundamentalist believes that there is only one way – his way – to realize this relation. His contingent, historical, human relationship is made absolute.

This means that a *specific approach* to the divine, a particular experience of the divine, is held as having *absolute validity* and is immediately seen as normative for all human beings. Every other experience, every other approach must be excluded and condemned. Anybody who disagrees with the fundamentalist must choose between the immediate acceptance of these abstract principles – which are to be applied concretely, without interpretation – and (if one does not adhere to the same principles) the likewise immediate exclusion; running thus the risk of being fought against and killed.

In other words, the fundamentalist forgets the fact that the absolute incarnates itself in the history of human beings. He absolutizes this history and believes to be already safe. In more general terms, fundamentalism is

an illness which originates in abstractness and in the rejection of interpretation. It is a pathology of the thought in which a particular, contingent, circumscribed assumption is *immediately* held to be valid, necessary and absolute for everyone.

In fundamentalism, allow me to repeat it, the human level is *identified*, together with its history and its language, with the absoluteness of the divine level. This process takes place without the necessary mediation. That is why fundamentalism is blasphemous. It makes the relationship between the particular and the universal rigid. It overlooks the fact that the Word of God always manifests itself through the words of human beings. It disregards the meaning of incarnation. It is a unilateral and improper way of understanding religious identity.

4. *Identity*

As a point of fact, our understanding of religious identity cannot be conceived of just in these terms. At least three different meanings can be attributed to the word “identity” in order to indicate the ways in which identity is realized. We can talk about a closed identity (or, using an image, a “wall-identity”); a reflective identity (that is to say, a “mirror-identity”) and, finally, an open identity.

“Wall-identity” is the one that sees the other merely as someone to be excluded. There has to be a wall between myself and the others so as to guarantee this exclusion. This, as we have seen, is the position taken by fundamentalist mentality on the issue of identity.

On the other hand, the image of the mirror presents us with another – less violent but just as much hegemonic – idea of identity. According to this model, the others are taken into account only on the basis of my assertion, of my confirmation. That is, their only function is to mirror my position. In this conception, the interlocutor serves merely to prove me right.

Finally, an open identity is an identity forged through my relationship with others. It can be viewed as such only if it realizes itself in this relationship: it is open to anything new that might occur in this relationship and is always open to new relationships. I am not erecting a barrier between me and the others in this case. I am not merely mirroring myself in them. Rather, in establishing a relationship with the others I

challenge the perception I have of myself and understand better who I am. Identity, therefore, is not something static, but a dynamic process, subject to constant becoming.

5. *Indifference*

So far I have attempted to shed some light upon the idea of identity and (in relation to fundamentalist interpretation of religion) on the difference between plurality and pluralism. I attempted to do so through a series of distinctions and in-depth analyses because, if we really wish to go to the heart of the matter, one of the basic features emerging from the common mentality of today is precisely the tendency to eliminate every distinction, to iron out and flatten everything to one single level. I will refer to this flattening, to this smoothing out of differences, with the term “indifference”.

Indifference is not only a feature of fundamentalism. Of course, as we have already seen, fundamentalism tends to blur the boundaries between particularity and universality, historicity and absoluteness. This is, furthermore, the reason why fundamentalism shows indifference towards (or even threatens to annihilate) anyone who has different beliefs. And yet, something similar is to be found in conceptions which are not religious in character. I refer above all to the conception that displays an attitude of indifference precisely towards the religious dimension.

This attitude is not to be exclusively identified with atheism because it is through its opposition to religion that atheism, in fact, acknowledges it, although only to the extent that religion is recognized as an opponent. What I am referring to here is the conception according to which all religious worlds are essentially the same and must, therefore, be repudiated. In other words, religions do not arouse much interest anymore. God is definitively dead. So, we have to definitively leave him behind.

This is how we understand nihilism today. As a matter of fact, *contemporary nihilism* is synonymous with indifference: an indifference shown, first and foremost, towards the religious field (see f.e. Diken, 2009). But this indifference is contagious. It transcends the boundaries of this field. In fact, everything can be placed on the same level: ideologies, philosophies, perspectives which are able to provide guidance for human

action. So, when seen through this indifferent and disenchanting gaze, nothing has meaning anymore.

Yet, that is not exactly how things are. Not everything is regarded with indifference. In the end, one saves at least one point of reference and the nihilist knows very well whose this point of reference is: his own.

6. *The illness of our time and the therapy for it*

If we wish to restate the main points of the reasoning followed so far, we might affirm that the analysis of fundamentalist mentality – seen as a reaction against religious pluralism – has contributed to bring to the fore both a specific *ontology* and a specific *logic*. In accordance with this ontology, the being of religion, the identity of religion, is interpreted in a closed, exclusive way. In accordance with this logic, what is particular is immediately apprehended as universal. Without the possibility of mediation; without making the necessary interpretations.

This logic and this ontology imply indifference. If viewed from a perspective of indifference, everything is the same, everything is placed on the same level. Therefore, nothing can arouse my interest. Nothing, besides my own position. A position that juxtaposes itself to other positions which, in their turn, believe to be the only ones of value. What ensues is a war of everyone against everyone. What ensues is the idea that if I am indifferent to the opinions of others, then it is not possible to avoid the use of violence.

The illness of our time is indifference. It is a contagious illness. As I have already stated above, it concerns not only the religious spheres or the secular attitude towards them but also, in more general terms, the life of the person that does not believe. Nothing has a meaning anymore: this is the nihilism we must deal with today.

What is the therapy for this illness? One of the possible answers could be provided by the line of reasoning that I followed thus far. If fundamentalism and indifference arise from a wrong way of looking at the relationship between the particular and the universal – that is to say, from the tendency to identify the contingent with the absolute and from the attempt to avoid mediation between these two levels – then the therapy should consist in rethinking this relation in a proper way. First of all, it is necessary to rethink the notion of universality.

7. *Universality and universalizability*

Now, if we wish to avoid both the rigidity of fundamentalism and the confusion of indifference, then we should, allow me to repeat it, establish a proper way to mediate between particularity and universality. This is where the problem lies. Yet, we cannot avail ourselves for this purpose of the mediation which has been developed by a certain philosophical tradition starting from Plato. Rather, we should refer to the idea of mediation which was elaborated by Christianity and was drawn upon by various strands of philosophical thought.

In fact, in order to “save the phenomena” from their contingency, *Plato* considers the content of a universal as fixed in nature. He locates the universal in another, preliminary world, which is defined once and for all: the world of ideas, the real, absolute and eternal world. The world of experience must comply with this world and be commensurate to it. If the phenomena of experience adhere to the world of ideas, then they can be legitimized and saved. They can be seen as objects of true knowledge. Otherwise they lose themselves in the flux of becoming. The philosopher – especially Socrates – guarantees and verifies the accuracy of this adherence. He is the one who provides phenomena with their stability. And he does so consistently, even putting his life at risk.

From the perspective of Plato, the phenomena of the world of experience undoubtedly gain a stable reference point. This occurs only if they adhere to the world of ideas. Nevertheless, there is *only one way* to achieve this adherence and to verify it and only the philosopher is aware of it. Anyone who is not aware of this way, or does not subscribe to it, is wrong. In Plato’s view, therefore, the mediation between particularity and universality is fixed, once and for all, in the form of an incorporation of the particular and the contingent, in a universal and eternal perspective. Because only the universal is valuable.

In opposition to this rigid and exclusive subsumption of the particular under the universal, *Christianity* invites us to follow another path: on the one hand, the path to incarnation and, on the other, the path to redemption. In philosophical terms, *incarnation* means that the absolute becomes contingent, that it enters into history. In this way there is no definite separation between history and eternity, which can be handled only by

letting the former comply with the latter (i.e. only by subordinating the particular to the universal). Rather, there is a dynamic relation which fosters the connection between these two levels and, at the same time, preserves their insurmountable difference. Furthermore, *redemption* is not only the focal and terminal point of salvation; it is not only an experience aimed at retrieving the eternity of what is contingent, but also the course that the human being must follow in order to realize all this. There is more. By means of the individual's moral actions and the participation in the community's rites, this course foreshadows, as much as possible, the eternal life on this earth.

If conceived in this way, both redemption and incarnation do not identify in an indifferent manner the absolute with the contingent, the universal with the particular. Neither do they separate once and for all these two levels or interpose between them – as the only possibility for correlation – an adherence of the former to the latter, seen as a subordination and an integration of the particular within the universal.

Rather, Christian history and Christian doctrine promote the idea of an authentic relation, a relation in which – as already stated before – the differences are maintained and the connection is established without eliminating them. This is possible because, unlike the static relationship envisaged by Plato, this relation is dynamic; it is not defined once and for all.

In other words, the sphere of the incarnation is where the absolute meets the contingent and inhabits it. What is contingent and historical is, in this way, sanctified and devoted to increasingly accomplish its sanctification throughout history. For this reason it can strive towards the absolute and undertake the path to redemption. Even so, the absolute remains absolute and the contingent remains contingent throughout this relationship.

Therefore, if the problem resides in the question of how to understand the relation between the particular and the universal without succumbing neither to indifference nor to fundamentalism, then the solution might be provided by opening up a different way for understanding the selfsame notion of “universality”. The point is not to separate the universal and the particular. Neither is it to blend them together. Their relationship arises from a mediation, from following a path. What underlies the transference of the particular to the universal is precisely this dynamic, this act of following a path: they coincide with the

process – which has to be chosen and activated – of universalization. If we start from this process of progressive universalization we can also begin to understand the concept of “mission”.

So, if universality is a process and not a given a fact, then we should talk about “*universalizability*” and not about “universality”. This term indicates the way in which the particularity of one’s position is not immediately viewed as universal or adhering to a universal dimension, but is, instead, prompted to *realize itself in a universal way*. This can be achieved only if one is willing to exchange views with others, only if one is exposed to the position of others and affirms oneself in relation to them. All this is intertwined with the awareness that, by virtue of incarnation, one’s particularity contains an aspect that can be universalized; an aspect that can stimulate openings instead of closures; an aspect that must be chosen and realized. It is faith that justifies and motivates the Christian to undertake and realize this process.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that plurality is not pluralism. It is a given fact, not a value in itself. It presents us with a problem – the relationship between various religions – that must be solved.

Fundamentalism offers a possible solution to this problem: the easiest and most comfortably effortless one. It argues that one’s particular position possesses a universal value. At its heart, therefore, fundamentalism coincides with relativism: it absolutizes a relativist stance. This is the reason why it disregards the possibility of mediation with the other and is disrespectful towards multiplicity. What ensues from the particular position assumed by fundamentalism is the contraposition of other particular positions which, in turn, immediately consider themselves as absolute.

Fundamentalism bears witness to indifference and adds to the confusion between the particular and the universal. It exemplifies an indifference inherent in many other, not necessarily religious, conceptions. Basically, indifference consists in confusing the particular with the universal, the relative with the absolute, and in avoiding the effort and engagement that mediation requires. This leads inevitably to violence (Schwartz, 1997).

In order to overcome this situation, it is necessary to adopt a different perspective. The given fact of universality must be transformed into the process of universalizability. It is not possible to achieve unity by attempting to make the self coincide with itself or by attempting to forge a closed identity. Rather, unity can be brought about by building up and fostering a true relationship between the self and others. Unity consists in a dynamics of unification.

This is the point. Unity is interaction and communion. This does not mean that I lose my identity or that I renounce the truth which this identity expresses. Neither does this mean that I shed this identity in favor of a wider dimension. Quite the contrary: the identity of the individual develops and is realized only through the relationships it establishes. In this way, this open identity contributes to move one's particular position towards the process of universalization: towards the universalizability of the act of welcome and the act of mission (Fabris, 2015).

From a practical perspective, this can be realized in many ways. Among these, the form which is most typical of the human being is communication. And yet, to "communicate" does not mean to transmit information. Rather, it means to create a space that can be shared by interlocutors: a space in which they can mutually understand each other. In particular, dialogue is one of the forms in which this communication takes place and fosters the sharing of what is proper to everyone (see f.e. Johannesen, Valde, Whedbee, 2007).

Summing up: dialogue, communication and the open identity they express allow us to experience the very same identity of Christianity and the dynamics of progressive universalization which characterizes it. All this contains the antidote to the illness of fundamentalism and indifference. Above all, this is what provides us with the indication of how to concretely realize and experience a "welcoming Church".

References

- Casanova José (1994), *Public Religions in Modern World*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Diken Bülent (2009), *Nihilism*, Routledge, London.
- Fabris Adriano (2015), *Filosofia delle religioni*, Carocci, Roma.

Joas Hans (2014), *Faith as an Option*, Stanford U.P., Stanford.

Johannesen Richard L., Valde Kathleen S., Whedbee Karen E. (2007), *Ethics in Human Communication*, Waveland Pr., Long Grove.

Lactantius (2002), *Divine Intitutes*, transl. by A. Bowen and P. Garnsey, Liverpool U.P., Liverpool.

Riesebrodt Martin (2001), *Die Rückkehr der Religionen. Fundamentalismus und der «Kampf der Kulturen»*, Beck, München.

Ruthven Malise (2007), *Fundamentalism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford U.P., Oxford.

Schwartz Regina (1997), *The Course of Cain. The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, Chicago U.P., Chicago.