

The Great Menace of fundamentalism

Interview with
Laurent Basanese, S.J.

Prof. Laurent Basanese SJ is the Director of the Centre for Interreligious Studies at the Gregorian University. He is an expert in Arab Christian Theological writings. Before coming to the Gregorian University, he taught in the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome. Prof Basanese SJ speaks to Victor Edwin for Jivan on the challenges of Christian Muslim Dialogue during the Jesuits among Muslims Meeting in Dakar, Senegal.

1. Father Laurent, the Gregorian University is opening a Centre for interdisciplinary study of interreligious relations. You, along with some of your colleagues, have been instrumental in getting this centre organized. Kindly tell us the nature of the centre and the type of courses that will be offered at this centre?

Recently, the Pontifical Gregorian University has established the Centre for Interreligious Studies. Earlier PUG had established an Institute that dealt with other religions and cultures. Thus, the new Centre can be better called a re-foundation of the old Institute in a new garb, as it will take into account the evolutions of interreligious dialogue in a world ever more globalized and in need of understanding. Its aim is to help the Christians to relate with people of other religions, mainly Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shintoism. Many of your readers may know that there is another Centre at the Gregorian deals specifically with Judaic Studies.

Our new Centre will offer courses, workshops, sessions, conferences to equip students with methodologies for deepening their knowledge on these religions and to deal with interreligious issues. Another specificity of the Centre is collaboration with other faculties at Greg. To be more precise, the Centre works as a service provider for the other faculties of the University. For instance, the Faculty of Theology would be asking us to prepare modules for their students to understand what “revelation” means in Islam or Hinduism.

2. You are a scholar on Arab Christian Theological Writings. The field is very vast. These Arab Christians are ‘West Asian Theologians’, aren’t they? Tell us briefly the specific richness of their theological writings?

Yes, the field is vast and Arab Christian Theologians are unfortunately not known much both in the East and in the West. The Arab Christian Theology is a rich heritage and belongs to the Churches like the one called the “Church of the East” which spread up to China in the 9th century, much more before the arrival of the Franciscans or the Jesuits! This Church – called also the Nestorian Church or today the Assyrians and the Chaldeans for those who are in communion with Rome – has a Syriac background. But after the rise of Islam in the 7th century, the Syriac theologians especially came to speak and write in Arabic. And we have many letters, treaties, books which express the Christian faith in the Arabic language. These Arabic Christian theologians were giving witness to their faith in the Muslim context. In a nutshell, these writings are an expression of our Christian theology in a Muslim context. Thousands of theological texts are yet to be studied... and the same number of Doctorates are foreseen in this field! Christian Arabic literature is the science of the years to come, after Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic... It is estimated that only 15% of this heritage has been put to light.

You have a special research interest in Fundamentalism. How do you assess the present situation in West Asia?

Fundamentalism is a great menace that threatens peace and harmony between people of different religious persuasions. Since the rise of Islam, some groups or schools of thought

have tried to retrieve the purity of the original Islam as they claim. But they don't agree with the other Muslims on what is "true Islam"...

I have worked the writings of Ibn Taymiyya (13-14th century) who is the author most read among the Wahhabis, the Salafists and always quoted by I.S.I.S. or others. These men and many modern Muslims scholars keep repeating Ibn Taymiyya's words: "Someone who does not prohibit having another religion, after the coming of Mohammed, the religion of Jews and Nazarenes, or rather, someone who does not hate them is not a Muslim – about this Muslims are in agreement." The present bewilderment created almost everywhere in the world by fundamentalism certainly has religious basis. I mean it is not only a social, political, economical issue as many assert. It is important to insist on this point. If the roots of evil, present in any ideological or utopian proposition (be it secular or religious), are not unmasked, the danger is great that it may spread over generations and corrupt cultures. No, if someone suffers cancer, it won't help that person if he/she was told that he or she suffered flu. One must tell the person clearly that he/she has cancer. And when someone has cancer, he/she runs a series of tests, in order to identify the cause of this cancer. The same for fundamentalism.

3. In your opinion, where is the fundamental fault-line?

In fact, it is a classical debate. It is a question of faith and reason. The fundamentalist perspective does not relate correctly nor convincingly on these two parameters. I profoundly agree with Immanuel Kant's statement that "a religion which rashly declares war on reason won't be able to hold out against it for long". And I would add: "despite the many destructions this ideology will create". But we can't wait passively 200 years more! The first challenge that Muslims, and with them the whole human community, must face according to me, if they do not want to sink deeper into irrationality, is an intellectual challenge. As I have said, it seems that the troubles that we are seeing in West Asia today, and even more elsewhere, will be repeated as long as the sources that feed fundamentalism are not purified and healed. It can be compared, when it expresses itself through violence, to a new form of Nazism because of the methods used and because of its promotion of racial and religious hatred: attacks against places of worship and culture (schools, cinemas, medias, museums), rejection of freedom of conscience, intimidations against opponents and women...

4. How do Muslims face this crisis in their religion?

Most of them are paralyzed, the same as when you find yourself in front of a great danger, you don't know how to behave, nor in which direction to move. They just condemn, and this is far from being sufficient. They look as if they don't have the tools to overcome this dreadful situation. It is true that it demands such a great effort, or even a revolution inside Islam itself. But condemning is not a scholar's mission, it is the politician's job. As for scholars, they have to face seriously the problems, be it exegetical, historical, or epistemological. Another recurring question in Islam since it emerged in the 7th century is in fact that of legitimacy of authority, legitimacy of the one who must lead and guide the Muslim community. It is normal to hear a general condemnation from recognized Muslim authorities.

But the problem is that radicals do not recognise the authority of those who condemn them! And because they are disqualified, any Muslim scholar is authorised to pronounce Fatwas or even Jihad in their place. We then infer that "the absence of clergy" so often emphasized as a strong – or positive – point of Islam reaches its limits, even if this view of a religion without regulations is not totally correct: the Ulema of Cairo or of Hyderabad are a kind of clergy.

It appears in fact possible to be a “good Muslim” living let us say an enlightened Islam, as well as an Islamic terrorist who finds his legitimacy on jihadist internet websites or a local Salafist mosque. The only benefit of these official condemnations is at least to show a consensus amongst the scholars of Islam, but they do not reach the roots of this evil. Because it is not enough to declare or to believe in something, one has to prove it “for oneself and for others” in order to provoke a true adhesion that reaches intelligence and heart and does not limit itself to superficiality and a wave of emotion.

5. Europe is considered to be another battle field for some Muslims who are Islamists. Do these Islamists influence other Muslims in Europe?

Ignorance and money from the petro-wealthy Arabic monarchies influence Muslims in Europe, and not only the Muslims... What is also attractive is that these Islamists, like the Muslim Brotherhood or the Tabligh Movement, have a project first of all for the “basic” Muslims: they propose a mission to them, a future, an apparently “strong” community, etc. They say that they need them... And this may be a true temptation in a secularized and indifferent society. Fortunately, all the “reformist movements”, especially amongst western Muslims, do not prone jihad for instance, even amongst the Salafists.

However, even these “peaceful” movements can become a substratum of a political Islam which is much more militant, and can even be violent. Furthermore, it must be known that all Salafists reject Democracy or Secularism. Democracy is theoretically rejected on the grounds that it assumes that power belongs to the majority and not to God. It grants sovereignty to the people, but neither the people nor parliament could be the source of the law; sovereignty only belongs to God. Furthermore there cannot be, according to their ideologists, a separation between religion and State since Islam is all encompassing and must rule the whole life of the Muslim.

Thus, Salafism refuses plurality and diversity in the Muslim community itself, for the benefit of a standardization of theology and doctrine. God being in essence One and Unique, there can only be, according to them, an only and unique way of adoring and worshiping him. “One and Unique” must translate into an only type of religious practice serving one vision of the world. Only their conception of Islam is authentic. The other Muslims have yielded to the illusions of modernity, of syncretism, of secularism, even atheism, and their fate is comparable to that of non Muslims.

6. Does the Catholic Church prepare herself adequately to deal with Muslims in her relations with them in Europe and elsewhere?

A Jesuit always cultivates a sense of dissatisfaction with the desire to find better, or to say it in a positive way, a Jesuit is or should be animated by the magis, the “greater”. So I would not say that we do enough or adequately in our relations with Muslims. We have to improve, in order not to leave them alone, which will be terrible for them and for us. They are our brothers and sisters in humanity and we cannot keep comfortably to ourselves. We must go out and meet them, get interested in what they say, how they live, what they suffer. In our encounters, which can of course be intellectual as it is in the Academic fields, we have to express our friendship, our proximity, but also our perplexities or even disagreements. What kind of man would he be who would give his blessing for any action of his friend, especially if he hurts himself or even others? He will not be a friend anymore but rather a traitor. For instance, I must challenge my Muslim friends when they put forward the law of apostasy in the academic arena or elsewhere. This law which is recognized as “divinely revealed” by all the schools of Islam – and not only by the Fundamentalists – punishes by death the Muslim who decides to think and believe differently. This law is against human nature and must be

condemned publicly, as some intellectual Muslims have already done, because God is never opposed to our nature, being our Creator: it would be a contradiction in terms. No, I must challenge the Muslims in charity and truth, and never hide my Christian belonging: Jesus is not only for the Christians, but for everyone. We cannot keep mute about this treasure which lays in our heart. The correct attitude, according to me, is simply to share what I bear. Not a few Muslims are becoming Christians in Europe, North Africa and elsewhere because they have met Jesus that some “old Christians” have sometimes forgotten, and they organize themselves in Associations of the faithful, etc.

7. The partners in interreligious dialogue are mutually enriched. What a Christian could offer to Muslims and what a Muslim could offer in return in their interfaith relations so that they could together seek ‘Truth’?

Christians in the Academic field could offer to Muslims first of all rigor and, second, a certain spirit of prayer in the research itself of “Truth”, as real theologians do. Objectivity, realism and a heart that embraces not only the whole human mankind, without excluding anyone, but also the invisible, the Word who at a certain point of time made himself flesh and visible, this should characterize the Christian soul. As for Muslims, they could teach us again the sense of passion and spontaneity, especially to Christians who have forgotten the presence of God. They remind us that we have not arrived yet into the heavens but that we are still on this earth, with so many other tribes, peoples, nations, that the mission is not finished and furthermore that we have done almost nothing up to now, but that God is at work and He is greater, much more great than my so limited life and poor deeds.

8. How do you see the role of the Society of Jesus in this apostolate?

The Society of Jesus should be a pioneer in this field, like in the others, listening to the movement of the Spirit, thanks to a personal and common prayer, the Spirit who always takes us out of our comfort zone, listening also to the calls of the world which is in need of truth and love. For the years to come, I think we have to commit ourselves better in what has been recommended at the 35th General Congregation, which is what we have underlined above, I mean Fundamentalism. I quote: “Jesuits are asked to accept the difficult task of expanding the dialogue to religious fundamentalism, of entering into contact with it, of improving activities in networks, etc.” (cf. “Issues for Ordinary Government” in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today*, 2011, p. 795). We are few in this “battlefield” but we are also numerous thanks to your prayers and your ongoing support.

Interviewed by Victor Edwin SJ: Lecturer - Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations (Vidyajyoti College of Theology), Director - VIDIS (Vidyajyoti Institute of Islamic Studies) and Secretary - CMRSA (Christian-Muslim Relations South Asia)