Thoughts on the 2002 Day of Prayer for Peace: The Continuing Contest Between Exclusivism and Pluralism

ON 24 January 2002, the Italian town of Assisi, the birthplace of St. Francis (1181–1226), hosted the third Day of Prayer for Peace convened by John Paul II.[1] The meeting was attended by 70 leaders of twelve religions, divided into 46 delegations, 31 of which were Christian, totalling 260 religious representatives.[22] The Vatican Press Office solicited the cooperation of the mass media to publicise the event. As a result, some 1,160 journalists came to Assisi, and the event was broadcast worldwide, allowing hundreds of millions of people on all continents to watch and listen to its messages. Moreover, unlike the previous two, this Day of Prayer was accompanied by many other local meetings worldwide, either ecumenical (among Christians) or interfaith. Bernardo Valli, professor of Mass Media Sociology at the University of Urbino, remarked that the audience represented "at least virtually, eight inhabitants of the earth out of ten."[3]

A Survey of the Event

On 24 January 2002, at 8:40 a.m., a company described as "the most singular pilgrimage after the times of Moses' march toward Mount Sinai" left the Vatican's rail station and arrived in Assisi at 10:30 a.m. From there, the attendees reached

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World Order 33.4 (Summer 2002): 34-49 (revised). An Italian translation of the essay was published in *Opinioni bahá'í* 2002.4: 14-39.

[1] The first Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi was held on 27 October 1986 during the war in Lebanon and near the end of the Cold War. The second Day of Prayer was held on 9 and 10 January 1993 during the Balkan conflict, when the Pope brought together Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious leaders to pray for an end to the Bosnian war.

[2] The twelve religions attending the Day of Prayer were African Traditional Religions, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, Tenrikyo, and Zoroastrianism.

[3] Bernardo Valli, "La preghiera di Wojtyla immersa nella storia ["Wojtyla's prayer is immersed in history"]," *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.20 (25 Jan. 2002): 1. All translations from Italian and French newspapers were made by the author.

Lower St. Francis Square in Assisi, where they gathered in front of a crowd of 2,300 people. At 11:00 a.m., the Pope opened the meeting.

In a short introduction, Cardinal François Xavier Nguyên Van Thuân, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, explained that the meeting was called

> to bear witness before men and women of goodwill,
> by . . . [the delegates'] shared commitment
> and by the prayer proper to each religious experience,
> to . . . [the delegates'] will to overcome opposition between peoples
> on behalf of an authentic promotion of peace.

He went on to say that

> [i]n the spirit of the first meeting in Assisi,
> we welcome the invitation to proclaim before the world
> that religion must never become
> a pretext for conflicts and acts of hatred and violence,
> like those seen once more in our days.[4]

After him, twelve religious representatives read their testimonies, echoing the theme of peace and unity among religions.

Bartholomew I of Constantinople, Ecumenical Patriarch, spoke first, stating that religions have the duty "to acknowledge the spiritual conditions for peace on earth."[5] Others, such as George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, described (in a

[4] Day of Prayer for Peace in the World, Words of Introduction by Cardinal François Xavier Nguyên Van Thuân. The English texts of all the statements may be found on the website <http://www.vatican.va/special/assisi_20020124_en.html>. In October 2002, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his Pontificate, John Paul II changed the presidents of a number of Pontifical Councils, including Cardinal François Xavier Nguyên Van Thuân, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. See "Wojtyla sta preparando la 'rivoluzione' del Terzo Millennio ["Wojtila is preparing the 'revolution' of the Third Millennium"]," *La Stampa* (Turin) 136.278 (11 Oct. 2002): 8.

[5] Day of Prayer for Peace in the World, Testimonies for Peace, Representatives of Different

message read by a representative) the Day of Prayer in Assisi as "a new stage in our journey, a sign of our commitment to one another, and to God who leads us forward together."[6]

The importance of deeds in interfaith dialogue, in addition to words and intentions, was stressed by Rabbi Israel Singer, President of the Governing Board of the World Jewish Congress, who said that, "[o]nly through serious dialogue and sincere commitment to physical engagement to peace on the part of the leaders of the major faiths, other [*sic*] than pronouncements alone . . . can we begin to change the current human condition."[7] Dr. Ishmael Noko, General Secretary of the World Lutheran Federation, emphasised the importance of interfaith dialogue because, through it, we can "bear witness first and foremost to a God who loves *the whole world,* rather than to one who is bound to certain national, cultural, or political allegiances."[8]

Chef Amadou Gasseto, Great Priest of Vodun Avélékété, an African traditional religion, pointed out that the "values which we should promote as religious leaders are those of love and social interaction in a world where in reality we are all brothers and sisters."[9] Mrs Didi Talwalkar, the representative of Hinduism, specifically of the Swadhyaya parivar (a self-help study movement), observed that "history repeatedly throws up instances where self-proclaimed saviours of religion have put religion in the service of power and divisive forces. We have seen how the religious orientation of the people is sought to be corrupted [*sic*] every so often."[10]

Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of Other Religions (hereafter referred to as Testimonies for Peace), Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I of Constantinople.

[6] Testimonies for Peace, George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury. The Archbishop was represented by Richard Garrard, Assistant Bishop for the Diocese of Europe of the Church of England and Director of the Anglican Centre in Rome.

[7] Testimonies for Peace, Rabbi Israel Singer (Judaism).

[8] Testimonies for Peace, Dr. Ishmael Noko (World Lutheran Federation).

[9] Testimonies for Peace, Amadou Gasseto (African Traditional Religion). Vodun Avélékété is one of the vodou (or vodun, voodoo, voudou) religions that can be traced to the West African Yoruba people who lived in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in the territories occupied today by Dahomey, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria. Slaves brought their religion with them to Haiti and other islands in the West Indies. In 1996, Vodun was formally recognized as Benin's official religion.

[10] Testimonies for Peace, Mrs. Didi Talwalkar (Hinduism). The Swadhyaya *parivar* (family) or "self-study" movement, founded in the 1950s by Pandurang Shastri Athawale of Bombay, is a

Finally, the contribution that religions, united among themselves as well as "with those who, without any relationship to religion, are men and women of goodwill," could make to the advancement of the cause of peace in the world was underlined by Catholic Chiara Lubich, founder of the Work of Mary (the Focolare Movement), who wished for and described "a single great dialogue which gives rise to that fraternity which can become, at this challenging time in history, the soul of the vast world community which, paradoxically, is today beginning to be called for by ordinary people and their leaders."[11]

The Pope then addressed the audience, saying:

> We wish to do our part in fending off the dark clouds of terrorism, hatred, armed conflict, which in these last few months have grown particularly ominous on humanity's horizon. For this reason we wish *to listen to one other* [*sic*]: we believe that this itself *is already a sign of peace. . . .* This already serves *to scatter the shadows of suspicion and misunderstanding*.

He added that

> *religious people and communities should most clearly and radically repudiate violence,* all violence. . . . *To offend against man* is, most certainly, *to offend against God.* There is no religious goal which can possibly justify the use of violence by man against man.[12]

After the delivery of the twelve testimonies, the delegations separated to pray in various places, as arranged by the Pope. Orazio Petrosillo, special correspondent

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self-help movement for poor villagers in India. It teaches that inner divinity can enable people to overcome self-hatred, prejudice, and the misery of poverty.

[11] Testimonies for Peace, Chiara Lubich (Catholicism). The Work of Mary (Focolare Movement) was approved in 1962 by Pope John XXIII as an association of the faithful. Focolare comprises people of various races, cultures, languages, professional and social backgrounds, Christians, members of other religions, and people of no religious conviction, all committed to bringing about a world with more solidarity and unity.

[12] Day of Prayer for Peace in the World: Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to representatives of world religions.

in Assisi for *Il Messaggero,* the most important daily newspaper in Rome, remarked that the prayers in Assisi are evidence "that humankind cannot achieve peace by itself, that true believers can only be in agreement with one another, . . . that true believers will never be terrorists."[13]

At 3:30 P.M., all the attendees gathered again in the Lower St. Francis Square. Here, writes Luigi Geninazzi, an expert on the life of the Catholic Church in Eastern Europe, "[f]or the first time in history Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, and Animist representatives, together with spiritual leaders of other religions, have solemnly entered into a common covenant for peace."[14]

Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, made short introductory remarks. After recalling the biblical prophecy of peace, "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into sickles," and briefly mentioning the highlights of the past hours, he said:

> Now peace must be strengthened further by the common commitment which each of us makes before the living God[,] before the brothers and sisters of our own religion, before those of other religions, and before all the world. Peace asks that we look with fresh courage, to the future of humanity and of the whole creation.[15]

Twelve religious representatives spoke after him, each stressing "the need to break down barriers of misunderstanding and contempt and build a shared culture of dialogue."[16]

Dr. Mesach Krisetya, President of the World Mennonite Conference, spoke last, observing that, "[i]n a world with ever more open borders, shrinking distances and better relations as a result of a broad network of communications, . . . security,

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[13] Orazio Petrosillo, "Assisi, il Papa prega per la pace nel mondo ["Assisi, the Pope prays for peace in the world"]," *Il Messaggero* (Rome) 124.22 (24 Jan. 2002): 6.

[14] Luigi Geninazzi, "Tre 'mai pi?' per rifare la storia ["Three 'never again' to change history"]," *Avvenire* (Rome) 35.20 (25 Jan. 2002): 3.

[15] . Isa. 2:4; Day of Prayer for Peace in the World, Impegno per la pace e congedo [Commitment to Peace and Envoy] (hereafter referred to as Impegno per la pace), 24 Jan. 2002. Monizione d'introduzione [Words of Introduction], Cardinal Francis Arinze.

[16] "Assisi Prayer Meeting Concludes," *Catholic World News.com*, 24 Jan. 2002.

freedom and peace will never be guaranteed by force but by mutual trust."[17] Pope John Paul II concluded the joint commitment by saying:

> Violence never again!
> War never again!
> Terrorism never again!
> In the name of God, may every religion bring upon the earth
> Justice and Peace,
> Forgiveness and Life,
> Love![18]

To end the ceremony, he placed a lit lamp on the front of the podium, and then all the representatives did the same.

When the meeting ended at 6:25 P.M., all the participants left by train for Rome. As a result of the enthusiasm raised by this event, some journalists began to speak of the Day of Prayer in Assisi as a tradition, and Father Vincenzo Coli, Superior of the Sacred Convent of Assisi, hoped for a "'small assembly of faithful of the various religions, gathering each year from today on in Assisi to meditate upon three common principles: faith in one God, the sacredness of each human being, the protection of Creation.'"[19]

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[17] Impegno per la pace, Impegno comune per la pace. The Mennonites are the successors of "the followers of the sixteenth-century radical reformer Menno Simons (1496–1561), a Dutch Roman Catholic priest who joined the Anabaptists in 1536" ("Mennonites," *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions,* ed. John Bowker [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997]).

[18] Impegno per la pace, Impegno comune per la pace.

[19] Father Vincenzo Coli, quoted in Marco Politi, "Pace, la preghiera di Assisi sotto gli occhi del mondo ["Peace, Assisi's prayer under the eyes of the world"]," *La Repubblica* (Rome) (27.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 10. For other journalists who expressed the same enthusiasm for a Day of Prayer as a tradition, see also Alessandro Zaccuri, "Lo Spirito di Assisi? Non è sincretista ["The spirit of Assisi? It is not syncretist"]," *Avvenire* (Rome) 35.19 (24 Jan. 2002):6; Pietro Scoppola, "La grande sfida delle religioni ["The great challenge of religions"]," *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 1, 17; Orazio Petrosillo, "L'incontro ecumenico: oltre 200 rappresentanti di 12 confessioni uniti nella sfida contro la violenza ["The ecumenical meeting: more than 200 representatives of 12 confessions united in a challenge against violence"]," *Il Messaggero* (Rome) 124.22 (24 Jan. 2002): 1; Orazio Petrosillo, "Il Papa: le tenebre non si dissipano con le armi ["The Pope: darkness cannot be dissipated through weapons"]," *Il Messaggero* (Rome) 124.33 (25 Jan.

On 24 February 2002, one month after the third Day of Prayer in Assisi, Pope John Paul II addressed to the heads of state and governments of the world a Decalogue of Assisi for Peace, which, in brief, called for

1. Doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of "violence and terrorism."
2. Educating people about "mutual respect and esteem."
3. Fostering a "culture of dialogue."
4. Defending "the right of everyone to live a decent life."
5. Recognising that "encountering the diversity of others can become an opportunity for greater reciprocal understanding."
6. Forgiving "one another for past and present errors and prejudices."
7. Taking "the side of the poor and the helpless," "speaking out for those who have no voice," and "working effectively to change these situations."
8. Making "every effort possible to offer the men and women of our time real hope for justice and peace."
9. Encouraging "all efforts to promote friendship" among people.
10. Urging the "leaders of nations to make every effort to create and consolidate, on the national and international levels, a world of solidarity and peace based on justice."[20]

The Purpose of the Event

WHEN Pope John Paul II convened the first Day of Prayer in Assisi in 1986, the first international meeting of religious representatives was seen as a response to the decline of atheist social states, the collapse of communist ideologies, and the dying embers of the Cold War. The second Day of Prayer in 1993 was convened to pray for an end to the Bosnian War. The timing of the invitation to the 2002 Day of Prayer no doubt reflects the tumultuous events of the recent past—the wars in the former

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2002): 2; Vittorio Peri, "Quello spirito che soffia sui cantieri della storia ["That spirit blowing over the builder's yards of history"]," *Avvenire* (Rome) 35.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 9.

[20] Letter of John Paul II to All the Heads of State and Government[s] of the World and Decalogue of Assisi for Peace, 24 Feb. 2002. See <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_20020304_capi-stato_en.html>.

Yugoslavia, genocides in Africa, conflict in the Middle East, and, most recently, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

According to Vatican spokesman Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, president emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the Vatican organised the Day of Prayer because it "'is vital that religions take sides with peace. Today, religious wars are undoubtedly an anachronism and a counter-testimony.'" The meeting in Assisi, he went on to say, was intended to mobilise "'consciences through religious leaders.'" [21] Luigi Accattoli, the Vatican correspondent for *Corriere della sera,* the most relevant Italian daily newspaper, observed that the Pope said, in his audience on the eve of the meeting: "'I am confident . . . that, besides exerting spiritual influences which elude human measuring, such an initiativemay contribute to guiding souls and their decisions about sincere and courageous resolutions of issues of justice and forgiveness.'"[22]

Several representatives of non-Christian religions recognised the need for reconciliation among religious communities. Rabbi Singer, an authority in the World Jewish Congress, is reported by Petrosillo as having said: "'We meet today to question one another, and thus we learn how to reconcile.'"[23] Dr Mansour Tantush, who represented the World Islamic Call Society in Italy, wished for the missionary rivalries among religions to stop: "Rather than a competition between da'wa [Islamic Call] and [Christian] mission, we must . . . practice cooperation in the service of humankind."[24]

The Accomplishments of the Day of Prayer

THE Day of Prayer in Assisi purported to do four things. First, the event was a response to the blasphemy of war in the name of God and "the testimony that in all

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[21] Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, quoted in Marco Politi, "'Ciascuno di noi crede nel suo Dio, ma abbiamo un sogno in comune' ["'Each of us believes in his own God, but we have a common dream'"]," *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 11.

[22] Pope John Paul II, quoted in Luigi Accattoli, "'Vado ad Assisi per pregare per la vera pace' ["'I go to Assisi in order to pray for true peace'"]," *Corriere della sera* (Rome) 127.20 (24 Jan. 2002): 5.

[23] Rabbi Singer, quoted in Orazio Petrosillo, "Un evento che ha superato il successo di sedici anni fa ["An event whose success is even greater than sixteen years ago"]," *Il Messaggero* (Rome) 124.23 (25 Jan. 2002): 2.

[24] Mansour Tantush, quoted in Camille Eid, "'Insieme contro ogni ingiustizia', ["'Together against every injustice'"]" *Avvenire* (Rome) 35.18 (23 Jan. 2002): 5.

religions, in different forms and expressions, peace and not war is a gift of God."[25] Second, the Day of Prayer was a challenge to the West in that it underscored the reality that peace cannot be achieved without justice, including religious tolerance. From this perspective, Moroccan journalist and writer Tahar Ben Jelloun pointed out that "the role of religions has changed. Although religion refuses to enter into the political arena, it has to interfere whenever either its message is betrayed, or its values are ignored or distorted."[26] Third, the Day of Prayer was "a response to the idea that once more appeared on the stage of cultural debate after 11 September—that is, the idea that religious faiths, with their radicality, are in themselves unavoidably factors of conflict." Finally, the Day of Prayer was "a challenge to all believers: Religious faith cannot become an identity card from which one may draw a sense of superiority and privilege."[27]

Some journalists saw in the Day of Prayer an attempt by the Vatican to reach beyond the traditional Catholic "exclusivist" positions—that is, the belief that only Catholicism is a "true" religion from God. While many observers have noted that the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, signed on 5 September 2000 by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and ratified and confirmed by John Paul II, seemed to endorse the exclusivist position again, some journalists saw the Day of Prayer as a softening of the exclusivist interpretation.[28] Valli wrote that "Assisi's religious rendezvous, as the two previous ones in '86 and '93, is the fruit of the Council declaration Nostra Aetate [Our Age] . . . . After that declaration, Catholicism does not pretend to be the one and only way of universal salvation. This revolution (which was considered as a "relativist" and, therefore, unworthy change by integralists within the Church of Rome) now justifies a choral condemnation of all them who use God for political or even martial ends by (almost) all monotheists gathered in St. Francis' town."[29] Gad

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[25] Scoppola, "La grande sfida delle religioni," *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 17.

[26] Tahar ben Jelloun, "La prossima volta a Gerusalemme ["Next time in Jerusalem"]," *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.20 (25 Jan. 2002): 16.

[27] Scoppola, "La grande sfida delle religioni," *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 17.

[28] Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger is the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. For a commentary on the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* on the unicity and the salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, see Julio Savi, "The Declaration *Dominus Iesus:* A Brake on Ecumenism and Interfaith Dialogue?" (*World Order* 32.2 (Winter 2000–01): 7–24.

[29] Valli, "La preghiera di Wojtyla immersa nella storia," *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.20 (25 Jan. 2002): 17. *Nostra Aetate* [Our Age] is a short declaration, in five chapters and twenty-three

Eitan Lerner, a well-known Italian left-wing journalist, added that, "[f]or the first time in history, [religions] feel obliged to dialogue. . . . Tomorrow none will be legitimately accused of having betrayed his faith, for having prayed yesterday in Assisi with the others. . . . There is not a God of the West and a God of the East. There is one God for all four cardinal points."[30]

Reactions to the Day of Prayer

GIVEN that the Day of Prayer was organised and conducted by the Holy See, it is hardly surprising that some complaints were expressed about the Holy See's perceived over-control of the event. Accattoli reported that people in "certain circles are displeased, like the Jews who have a feeling that they were 'manipulated'. . . . The attending Rabbis did not choose the [Jewish] speaker; the organisers appointed him. It seems the same method was adopted with other groups as well."[31]

Moreover, the comments of most journalists gave such prominence to the central position of the Pope in the event, that suspicion may be aroused, for they seemed to consider the other participants as minor supporting actors. Politi reported the following words by Cardinal Etchegaray: "'After all, he [the Pope] is the only one who can gather around himself leaders of so many religions.'"[32] Geninazzi related the following words by Rabbi Singer: "'You alone, your Holiness, could call such a meeting'"—words that are only partially counterbalanced by the Rabbi's further observation: "'But you could not succeed without us.'"[33]

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paragraphs, on "The relations of the Church with non-Christian religions" published by Second Vatican Council on 28 October 1965. In the context of Valli's quotation, the term *relativist* refers to "theories or doctrines that truth . . . [is] relative to situations and . . . not absolute" ("Relativism," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed.); the term *integralists* refers to "the more strictly confessional and clerical sector of the Catholic world" (Salvatore Battaglia, "Integralismo," *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* 8 [Turin: UTET, 1977]).

[30] Gad Eitan Lerner, "Con religioni in arretrato, il moderno in tilt ["With backward religions the modern in trouble"]," *Avvenire* (Rome) 35.20 (25 Jan. 2002): 20.

[31] Luigi Accattoli, "Critiche dagli ebrei sulla 'regia.' E le donne erano troppo poche ["Blames from the Jews on the 'regié.' And women were too few"]," *Corriere della sera* (Rome) 127.22 (26 Jan/ 2002): 16.

[32] Cardinal Etchegaray, quoted un Politi, "'Ciascuno di noi crede nel suo Dio, ma abbiamo un sogno in comune,'" *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 11.

[33] Rabbi Israel Singer, quoted in Geninazzi, "Tre 'mai pi?' per rifare la storia," *Avvenire* 35.20 (25

Possibly, the over-control by the Vatican and the excessive emphasis on the figure of the Pope contributed to the absence of certain religious groups. One of the most notable absentees was the Archbishop of Canterbury, who did, however, send a message to the participants. John Philips, correspondent of the London *Times* in Assisi, pointed out that "Vatican sources said that the Pope understood . . . his absence . . . [was due to] a longstanding engagement to consecrate a bishop in America."[34] The Dalai Lama also excused himself because of previous engagements that could not be postponed and sent a representative but not a personal message.

The delegation of the Patriarchate of Moscow failed to send its most prominent spokesman. Delegations of the Greek Orthodox Church also declined to attend because, "although the Pope begged its pardon last May, regarding the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders (1204), still it does not feel like praying with the Catholic Church."[35]

A French journalist and special correspondent of *Le Figaro* (Paris) at the Vatican, Alain Barluet, mentioned "the absence of front-ranking personages among Jews and Muslims." The Italian press noted the absence of Chief Rabbi emeritus Elio Toaff, who excused himself because of a "cold," and the new Chief Rabbi of Rome, Riccardo Di Segni.[36] Henri Tincq, special correspondent of *Le Monde* (Paris) at Assisi, pointed out that "the absence of Sheikh Tantawi, rector of the University Al-Azhar in Cairo, the highest authority of Sunni Islam, has been noticed."[37]

Accattoli described the Vatican's attempt to explain the absences as follows:

> Twelve religions responded to the call of the Pope, precisely the same number as in 1986. The total number is the same, but there are differences among the

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Jan. 2002): 3.

[34] . John Phillips, "World Religions leaders join Pope in prayer for an end to terrorism," *Times* (London) 67357 (25 Jan. 2002): 1.

[35] Accattoli, "Critiche dagli ebrei sulla 'regia.' E le donne erano troppo poche," *Corriere della sera* (Rome) 127.22 (26 Jan. 2002): 16.

[36] Alain Barluet, "Journée de prière pour la paix à Assisi ["Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi"]," *Le Figaro* (Paris) 17 872 (24 Jan. 2002): 4; Bruno Bartoloni and Paolo Brogi, "Un treno blindato porterà il Papa ad Assisi ["An armored train will carry the Pope to Assisi"]," *Corriere della sera* (Rome) 127.18/19 (23 Jan. 2002): 19.

[37] Henri Tincq, "L''esprit d'Assise' invoqué contre le fanatisms ["The 'spirit of Assisi' invoked against fanaticism"]," *Le Monde* (Paris) 58.17729 (25 Jan. 2002): 3.

> minor presences. At that time, there were Bahá'ís and Amerindians, but their place has been now taken by Tenrikyo [a Shinto sect] . . . and Confucians. There are no special reasons—the Vatican says—for presences or absences, then and now, of the minor groups: the short lapse of time between the announcement of the initiative and the fixed date gives ample space to casualness in the acceptance or refusal of the invitation.[38]

Furthermore, the press voiced doubts about the practical value of the event. "But what impact will . . . [the Pope's] initiative have on the streets of the world, among those who engage in violence against those of other faiths?" *BBC News* asked. "Symbolic gestures do not usually persuade such people to lay down their weapons."[39] The Italian sociologist and writer Gaspare Barbiellini Amidei wrote: "Today's meeting is a success in itself. From tomorrow on, the difficult thing is to begin again to remove the mines of fanaticism poisoning everyday life."[40]

At least five factors possibly influence the doubts expressed by Barbiellini Amidei and others in the organisation of the Day of Prayer. First, many of the attendees were not the true representatives of their religions, given the fact that many of them were chosen not by their coreligionists but by the Vatican. Second, the event's success was ascribed by the press not to the number, wide range, and prestige of the participants but mainly to the personality of an organiser (the Pope) who does not represent all religions but only a part of one of the twelve participating religions. Third, throughout the proceedings of the event, as during the previous events, organisers were careful to use the locution "religious traditions" rather than "religions." (This fact recalls a statement made by Alessandro Bausani, an Italian scholar of Islam and other religions, who wrote that in the past certain scholars gave such restrictive definitions of religion "that you inevitably deduce from those definitions that the only religion worthy of the name is" their own and "that the

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[38] Luigi Accattoli, "La giornata della pace ["The Day of Peace"]," *Corriere della sera* (Rome) 127.18/19 (23 Jan. 2002) 18. The Shinto sect Tenrikyo was founded in Japan in 1838 by Nakayama Miki (1798–1887).

[39] "Pope lights beacon of hope," *BBC News* 24 Jan. 2002, 23:08 GMT.

[40] Gaspare Barbiellini Amidei, "Insieme, non confusi ["Together, without creating confusion"]," *Corriere della sera* (Rome) 127.20 (24 Jan. 2002): 17.

others are 'false religions,' nay, they cannot even be called religions."[41]) Fourth, exclusivist ideas were still present, although neither openly stated nor universally shared, among the participants.

However, perhaps the most significant shortcoming of the Day of Prayer in the eyes of the press and, no doubt, many observers was the failure of the attendees to pray together. Cardinal Etchegaray justified the division of the delegations for prayer by observing that "'[p]rayer does not have the same meaning in the various religions. . . . The point is that people may come together. There is no intention of creating a 'united front' of religions. I rather see a great chain uniting all faiths in the cause of the service to humankind, peace and justice.'" When asked whether God is one for all believers, the Cardinal replied: "'Everyone thinks of God, but not of the same God.'"[42] Father Justo Lacunza, director of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, described the various positions of religionists with exclusivist tendencies by noting that "[s]ome want to keep their God for themselves and consider praying and uniting their hearts to the supplications of the others as a liturgical offence. Some want to preserve their religious integrity at any cost to the point of considering a common prayer as a terrible danger to their spiritual safety. Moreover—we should not forget—some believers are afraid of joint meetings, where their faith identity may be lost."[43]

Barluet wrote:

> We must recognise . . . the suspicion that such an initiative raises among certain exponents of religion . . . in whose eyes interfaith dialogue is not a priority issue today. And even in Rome, although the Pope's initiative is not openly criticised, some questions have been raised to the effect that "We concede a lot to the other religions, but we receive back very little."[44]

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[41] Alessandro Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í* (Rome: Casa Editrice Bahá'í, 1991) 18.

[42] Cardinal Etchegaray, quoted in Politi, "'Ciascuno di noi crede nel suo Dio, ma abbiamo un sogno in comune'," *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 11.

[43] Justo Lacunza, "I credenti oggi non possono restare muti e indifferenti ["Today believers cannot keep silent and remain indifferent"]," *Il Messaggero* (Rome) 124.23 (25 Jan. 2002): 2.

[44] Barluet, "Journée de prière pour la paix à Assisi," *Le Figaro* (Paris) 17 872 (24 Jan. 2002): 4.

This hostility is also rife among more conservative, exclusivist Italian lay Catholics. *BBC News* reported two members of Italy's governing coalition, Federico Bricolo and Massimo Polledri, as having stated that "'[t]o pray with heretics, schismatics, rabbis, mullahs, witch doctors and various idolaters creates confusion among Catholic believers.'"[45]

The Relationship of the Day of Prayer to the Process of Interfaith Dialogue

ELIO Bromuri, a professor at the Theological Institute of Assisi, wrote:

> "In Assisi . . . the realisation of the meeting has come before the theoretical elaboration; prayer has been preeminent over theology. However, theology cannot escape an unavoidable rendezvous. Theologians must endeavour to understand and explain what happened in Assisi because one cannot be satisfied with the event itself and its realisation."[46]

In the opinion of most scholars, the Catholic Church's participation in the process of interfaith dialogue started when the Second Vatican Council of 1963–65 (widely referred to as Vatican II) published a declaration whereby "[w]hatever good or truth is found amongst them [the non-Christians] is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel."[47] This Declaration marked, for the Catholic Church,

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[45] Federico Bricolo and Massimo Polledri, quoted in "Pope leads world prayer day," *BBC News* 24 Jan. 2002, 12:18 GMT. The two deputies belong to "Lega," the party founded by the Italian right-wing politician, Umberto Bossi. The Italian press have commented on their statements as well; see Danilo Paolini, "Due leghisti contro l'Ulivo: 'Che offesa' ["Two representatives of the 'Lega' party against the 'Olive {both the symbol of peace and the logo of the Italian left wing coalition}: 'What a shame'"]," *Avvenire* (Rome) 35.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 7; Danilo Paolini, "La Lega: passo falso della Chiesa ["The 'Lega' party: a false step by the Church"]," *Il Messaggero* (Rome) 124.22 (24 Jan. 2002): 6; Roberto Zuccolini, "Ma la Lega contesta il meeting: 'Un passo falso della Chiesa' ["But the 'Lega' party contests the meeting: 'A bad move by the Church'"]," *Corriere della sera* (Rome) 127.20 (24 Jan. 2002): 5.

[46] Elio Bromuri, quoted in Peri, "Quello spirito che soffia sui cantieri della storia," *Avvenire* (Rome) 35.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 9.

[47] Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium,* 21 Nov. 1964, chap. 1, no. 16. The English text of Lumen Gentium may be found on the website <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html>.

the passage from its ancient exclusivist positions to a new one, defined as inclusivist, whereby, in the words of William L. Rowe, professor of philosophy at Purdue University, "while denying the *ultimate validity* of other religions, the inclusivist Christian may still allow that the adherents of . . . other religions may attain salvation by following the paths to salvation laid down by those religions."[48] In other words, an inclusivist position recognises that other religions may lead to God (albeit not by the "right" path), while an exclusivist position maintains that no other religion may lead to God.

The new inclusivist position enabled the three popes who succeeded John XXIII (1958–1963) to continue interfaith dialogue to the point of giving the impression that they had come closer to positions that John H. Hick, a leading philosopher of religion and interreligious dialogue, would define as pluralist—that is, to the idea "that the great religious traditions of the world represent different human perceptions of and response to the same infinite divine Reality."[49] The pluralist conception has been recently reformulated by Hick, who stresses the dangers of the inclusivist and exclusivist theories whereby "there can only be one true—or at least fully true—religion" and recommends, on the contrary, that all religions make an effort to realise "that objectively no religion is the one and only true religion, and that we must all become able to interact with people of other faiths on that basis."[50]

The first Day of Prayer in Assisi in 1986, the second Day of Prayer in 1993, and the Interreligious Assembly "On the Eve of the Third Millennium: Collaboration of the Different Religions," held in the Vatican on 24–28 October 1999,[51] may be considered as significant events in the process of interfaith dialogue, characterised by the Catholic post-Vatican II inclusivist vision. However, in 2000, the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* seemed to confirm exclusivist theories by describing the Catholic Church as the unique repository of absolute truth on earth, a truth the

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[48] William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction,* 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993) 177, 178.

[49] John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1990) 119.

[50] John Hick, "Only one true religion?," *The Bahá'í Studies Review* 10 (2001/2002) 1, 6.

[51] The Interreligious Assembly was convened on the eve of the third millennium by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to explore the possibilities of collaboration among the different religions. It was attended by two hundred participants from almost fifty countries and twenty different "religious traditions," personally invited by the Pontifical Council itself.

diffusion of which to all the world was indicated as the primary purpose of the Catholic world. Therefore, the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* has been widely considered a brake on, if not a regression in, interfaith dialogue.

Obviously, the Pope who called and celebrated the 2002 Day of Prayer in Assisi cannot be totally different from the one who, at the end of 2000, ratified and confirmed *Dominus Iesus.* Therefore, his (and, accordingly, the Church's) present position cannot be considered as pluralist but at most as inclusivist. This nonpluralist, inclusivist position, tending toward exclusivism, was quite evident in the organisation of the Day of Prayer in Assisi, most specifically in the division of the delegations for prayer; in the implicit idea of a unity among religions in the name of human reason and not in the name of one God; in the over-control by the Vatican; and in the central position occupied by the Pope during the entire day.

During the Day of Prayer in Assisi, the two fundamental factors that prevented religions from going a step further in interfaith dialogue were the fear of syncretism (the attempted reconciliation or union of different or opposing principles or practices)[52] and the fear of losing one's identity of faith, expressed by specific dogmas and rituals.

As to the fears of syncretism, the Vatican made it quite clear that the Day of Peace should not be interpreted as a step toward syncretism. Although the Vatican convened the meeting to pray for peace, the delegations were not asked to pray together because, in Cardinal Arinze's words, "'each one has his own belief.'"[53] Cardinal Etchegaray explained the concept of separatism by observing that: "'Being together to pray does not mean praying together. Let us avoid syncretism.'"[54] Politi relates that the Cardinal was

> quite clear on this point. The Vatican decided on its conduct without waiting for traditionalist attacks against the spiritual summit promoted by the Pope. At

[52] Syncretism has been defined as the "amalgamation of religious beliefs and practices in such a way that the original features of the religions in question become obscured" ("Syncretism," *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*).

[53] Cardinal Arinze, quoted in Politi, "Pace, la preghiera di Assisi sotto gli occhi del mondo," *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 10.

[54] Cardinal Etchegaray, quoted in Politi, "'Ciascuno di noi crede nel suo Dio, ma abbiamo un sogno in comune'," *La Repubblic*a (Rome) 27.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 11.

> the beginning of January, Cardinal Walter Kasper declared that the faithful of Christ and the followers of the other religions could not "pray together." However, Christians and non-Christians could share their sense of, and longing for, God and the Divine.[55]

Monsignor Sergio Goretti, Bishop of Assisi, said about the separate places for prayer: "'"The spirit of Assisi" consists of renouncing intimidation and violence in mutual respect and acceptance. It is a spirit of love and brotherhood. This spirit has been sometimes misinterpreted in a syncretistic way, as a mixture of beliefs wherein differences are lost, and people come to be united on nothingness.'"[56]

As to the fear of losing one's identity of faith, Bausani notes two significant "apples of discord" in interfaith conflicts: *"dogmas* in theory and *rites/sacraments* in practice."[57] These two aspects—theoretical and practical—are interwoven in the philosophy behind the separation of prayers in Assisi: the theoretical, dogmatic aspect that seeks to define a separate God for each religion and that does not define the others' religious systems as "religions" but as "religious traditions" and the practical aspect that mandated that the various rituals of prayer supersede any other considerations to the point of exclusionism. In fact, most representatives did not object to the separation of the delegates for prayers (one journalist noted that the arrangement enabled the participants to preserve "untouched and unimpaired their faith" without being "flattened on one another"[58]) or to the term "religious traditions" used to describe all the convened religions. The fears of syncretism and of losing one's identity of faith were, for many, more potent than any other consideration. This subtle exclusivist tendency became even more manifest in the refusal to create a "'"united front of religions,"'" and in the expressed satisfaction with the fact

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[55] Politi, "'Ciascuno di noi crede nel suo Dio, ma abbiamo un sogno in comune,'" *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 11. Cardinal Walter Kasper is the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

[56] Monsignor Sergio Goretti, quoted in Zaccuri, "Lo spirito di Assisi? Non ? sincretista," *Avvenire* (Rome) 35.19 (24 Jan. 2002):6.

[57] Bausani, *Saggi* 82.

[58] Elio Toaff, "Tanti incontri e gesti: le arcate del nuovo ["A lot of meetings and gestures: the arcades of innovation"]," *Avvenire* (Rome) 35.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 16.

that in Assisi, "'[t]he aspect of a 'parliament of religions,' so dear to nineteenth-century America, in the times of Vivekananda, has been carefully avoided."[59]

The inclusivist approach to the Day of Prayer does not diminish the value of the words spoken at the event, disavowing violence perpetrated in the name of religion. Nor does it diminish the hope that religions may finally cease to contend for primacy in the world and begin to accept their common origins from the same God.

However, one may wonder what the masses of believers and nonbelievers, often unable to distinguish between inclusivist and exclusivist attitudes, think of practising believers and religious leaders gathered in Assisi. On the one hand, such believers and spiritual leaders preach peace among religions. On the other, the same practising believers and religious leaders want to pray in separate places; they accept the shadow of the disunifying idea that people do not worship the same God and that they do not follow paths that may be compared with one another, and thus they do not look at each other's religions as being equal; and, finally they do not like to call each other's belief systems "religions" but prefer the neutral locution of "religious traditions." They assume these attitudes because of their attachment to their ideas on theological dogmas and the exclusivist value of ritual. This attachment in the eyes of the masses of believers and nonbelievers may well smell of bigotry. Bigotry is undoubtedly a factor in the estrangement that exists between people of various religions and, in its most extreme aspects, in episodes of violence. Moreover, if naive believers do not receive clear and straightforward messages from their religious leaders, on whose example they are inclined to rely, such uninformed believers, who do not look positively on interfaith meetings such as the ones held in Assisi, will never forsake their exclusivist positions and turn to more inclusivist or pluralist attitudes, in a globalised world that requires them to live side by side with followers of other religions. It will be challenging to draw practical results from interfaith dialogue without wholeheartedly attempting to create the required conditions whereby, sooner or later, all religions may meet on a level playing field—one of equal freedom of choice. In light of these considerations, the impact of

[59] Cardinal Etchegaray, quoted in Politi, "'Ciascuno di noi crede nel suo Dio, ma abbiamo un sogno in comune'," *La Repubblica* (Rome) 27.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 11; Clément, "Conta la scoperta dell'altro," *Avvenire* (Rome) 35.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 16. Vivekananda (1863-1902) was the "founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, which now has more than a hundred centers throughout the world" ("Vivekananda," *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*).

the 2002 Day of Prayer is perhaps not as far-reaching as the organisers and the participants might have hoped. All these reflections confirm that the inclusivist approach does not enable religions to move from the present stage of intentions of peace and unity, as clearly and forcefully expressed as they may be, to the state of practical realisation.

Many agree that interfaith dialogue is still at the beginning of its development and, thus, susceptible to further advancement. For example, Jane Lampman, staff writer of The *Christian Science Monitor*, reported an observation made by David Rosen, Chief Rabbi of the International Council of Christians and Jews, who attended the Assisi meeting: "'Most of our traditions are beginning to come out of their childish, exclusive cocoons and are learning that we have to work together for a better world.'"[60] Talwalkar, representing Hinduism, wished that the world might "move to a coalition of world's religions to safeguard a shared future blessed by God."[61]

Where Can Interfaith Dialogue Go From Here?

THE inclusivist approach has led interfaith dialogue to an impasse where it has dwelt for far too long. The question that faces the interfaith movement today is how might the world's religions transcend inclusivism and reach a higher state of unity and understanding. The question is not new; it has been addressed by various religious scholars and writers, in addition to those offering public statements at Assisi, and their answers cover the gamut from exclusivist apologetics to what might be called "inclusivism, *but"* to a more universal, if somewhat undefined, approach.

There was a certain awareness in Assisi of the implicit dangers of exclusivist attitudes. The Archbishop of Canterbury pointed out in a message presented on his behalf that "our traditions can be misused to set people apart, rather than bringing them together" and went so far as to add that "we have sometimes defined ourselves by what divides us, rather than what we share."[62] During the meeting, Talwalkar, the Hindu representative, clearly said: "The true message of religion is not and cannot be bigotry."[63] Moreover, the same representatives who did not object to the

[60] Chief Rabbi David Rosen, quoted in Jane Lampman, "Faith groups gather in Assisi to seek peace," *Christian Science Monitor* 24 Jan. 2002.

[61] Testimonies for Peace, Mrs. Didi Talwalkar (Hinduism).

[62] Testimonies for Peace, The Archbishop of Canterbury.

[63] Testimonies for Peace, Mrs. Didi Talwalkar (Hinduism).

exclusivist attitudes stated that "religions must not clash"; that "religionists, when they pray, achieve a better understanding of the need and the wealth of peace"; that, therefore, "religion can and ought to help men and women to meet, to live side by side, to assist one another in building a just world"; and that "all religions are called to look to the future and to forsake diatribes of theological and exegetical character and ought rather to keep in mind the real needs of the world, of the peoples and individual human beings."[64] A few, such as Father Lacunza, saw beyond the inclusivism to a more profound unity that the separation of the delegates for prayer seemed to belie. He stated that

> [a] reawakened human spiritual dimension enables us today to go beyond doctrinal disputes, cultural differences and language barriers. There is a shared space in the Assisi Day of Prayer because there are no political areas, cultural zones, or geographical regions in the human spirit. We pray together because what unites us is more potent than what divides us.[65]

However, this emerging awareness seems insufficient to draw religions away from their old inclusivist approach. While the position has undoubtedly been commendable as a first step in leaving behind an unacceptable and dangerous exclusivism, it has, nonetheless, been wholly inadequate for solving the problem of continuing religious conflicts and promoting the idea that religions may be beneficial factors in the development of human civilisation.

In the Bahá'í perspective, no theoretical or practical considerations seem sufficient in our day to justify the remnants of exclusivist attitudes evinced during the Day of Prayer. The secular, materialistic world that seeks to prevent the interference of any religious institution in the lives of individuals and communities can be persuaded to view religions and their leaders with renewed trust and hope only if those leaders are willing to unite around a theoretical solution and then prove capable of guiding their followers effectively toward a practical resolution of their

[64] Toaff, "Tanti incontri e gesti: le arcate del nuovo," *Avvenire* (Rome) 35.19 (24 Jan. 2002): 16.
[65] Lacunza, "I credenti oggi non possono restare muti e indifferenti," *Il Messaggero* (Rome) 124.23 (25 Jan. 2002): 2.

many differences—differences that have been and still are important provocateurs of past and present violence.

The unyielding and as yet unscalable wall that shores up such religious differences is, according to Bahá'í scripture, the exclusivist teaching that only one religion has a divine origin and is, therefore, absolutely true and that the others are, at best, only relatively true. In 1985, the Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing and legislative body of the Bahá'í Faith, addressed this issue:

> Followers of all religions must be willing to face the basic questions which this strife [among religions] raises, and to arrive at clear answers. How are the differences between them to be resolved, both in theory and in practice? The challenge facing the religious leaders of mankind is to contemplate, with hearts filled with the spirit of compassion and a desire for truth, the plight of humanity, and to ask themselves whether they cannot, in humility before their Almighty Creator, submerge their theological differences in a great spirit of mutual forbearance that will enable them to work together for the advancement of human understanding and peace.[66]

Such an approach calls for followers of all religions to renounce "all those claims to exclusivity or finality that, in winding their roots around the life of the spirit, have been the greatest single factor in suffocating impulses to unity and in promoting hatred and violence."[67]

The fears expressed during the Day of Prayer in Assisi about moving away from the exclusivist and inclusivist approaches have been essentially two: the fear of syncretism and the fear of losing one's identity of faith.

Abandoning all "claims to exclusivity or finality" is not necessarily tantamount to falling into syncretism because, for Bahá'ís, religion "is not a series of beliefs, a set of customs; religion is the teachings of the Lord God." It "is the

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[66] The Universal House of Justice, The Promise of World Peace: To the Peoples of the World, Oct. 1985, in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963–1986: The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*, comp. Geoffry W. Marks (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, IL, 1996) no. 438.32.

[67] The Universal House of Justice, To the World's Religious Leaders, Apr. 2002, "A Challenge to the World's Religious Leaders," *World Order* 33.4 (Summer 2002): 13.

revelation of the will of God, the divine fundamental of which is love." Therefore, "[t]hose who would have men believe that religion is their own private property once more bring their efforts to bear against the Sun of Truth: they resist the Command of God."[68]

Despite the Bahá'í teachings about the nature of religion, certain scholars have written that the Bahá'í Faith is syncretistic.[69] However, their judgment reflects their superficial understanding of the Bahá'í Faith and, perhaps, their religious or atheistic exclusivist bias, which does not allow them to accept the possibility that God may have sent a new revelation to humankind in the nineteenth century. Hence, they ascribe the elaboration of the entire structure of the Bahá'í Faith to Bahá'u'lláh as a human being rather than taking into consideration His claim to be the latest in a long succession of Messengers of God. Thus, when Bahá'ís recommend a pluralist approach to the leaders and the followers of all religions, suggesting that they abandon all "claims to exclusivity or finality," this is not an invitation to come together and found a new religion that will bring all others within its purview. Instead, it is an invitation to make an effort to understand an important concept, the foundations of which may be discovered in all scriptures of the world: "The religion of God is one religion," and all religions "derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God."[70] The differences among the present-day religions

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[68] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá,* comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Committee at the Bahá'í World Centre and Marzieh Gail (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1997) 52; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912,* comp. Howard MacNutt, 2d ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 315; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911*, 12th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995) 33.8. In the Bahá'í scriptures the locution "Sun of Truth" denotes the Logos, the Word of God.

[69] See, for example, J. B. Noss, *Man's Religions*, 6th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980) 543–54; Cyril Glassé. "Bahâ'îs," *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (Harper, 1989); S. A. Nigosian, *World Faiths* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) 440; Michael Fischer, "Social Change and the Mirrors of Tradition: The Bahá'ís of Yazd," in Heshmat Moayyad, ed., *The Bahá'í Faith and Islam: Proceedings of a Symposium, McGill University, 23–25 March 1984* (Ottawa, Canada: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1990) 26.

[70] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 52; Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* trans. Shoghi Effendi, lst ps ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) 217.

do not depend on their essential teachings, the "basic foundation" of which is "the principle of love, unity and the fellowship of humanity."[71] The differences either concern their social teachings, related to geographical and historical circumstances, or are purely historical and cultural and, therefore, of secondary importance. A Bahá'í invitation to a pluralist approach is an invitation to rise above theological disputes and conflicts and to consider all peoples, with their various religions, as the children of the same "unknowable Essence, the Divine Being . . . immensely exalted beyond every human attribute," Whom we call God and Whom we conceive in different ways according to our specific religious background but Who is always the same.[72]

Religious leaders may want to reflect on their fears about losing their identities. They may want to consider that, above and beyond specific dogmas and rituals, religious identities may be traced in the scriptures as well as in the history of each religion. Thus, for example, Jews may well pride themselves on the faithfulness that moved Abraham to surrender to a demanding God Who asked him to sacrifice his beloved son or on the rapture of love that moved their King David to compose and sing his psalms. Muslims may well praise the forceful words of the Qur'an or the deep spirituality of Imam 'Alí, who, when absorbed in prayer, was insensitive to pain, or the beauty and spiritual depths of such mystic poets as Rúmí or Ḥáfiẓ. Christians may well glory in the beatitudes uttered by Jesus Christ in His Sermon on the Mount, or in the courage of Mary Magdalene, who spurred the Apostles to overcome their fear and to leave their houses and spread the word of Christ, or in the ecstatic rapture of the *Canticle of Brother Sun* by St. Francis. These identifying factors seem to have a much higher and nobler value than any dogma or ritual. Moreover, they are deeply rooted in each specific tradition and are evocative of its spiritual power; they are not as divisive as certain dogmas that pretend to give an *exclusive* and *absolute* definition of an unknowable God. No prayer shared by members of various religions, as theologically and ritualistically different as those religions may be from one another, no abandonment of any claim "to exclusivity or finality" will ever deprive any believer of a strong religious identity when it is based on the scriptures and history of which each religion may feel justly proud.

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[71] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 443.

[72] Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude,* trans. Shoghi Effendi, lst ps ed. (Wilmette, IL.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) 98.

Human civilisation is at a crossroads. It may take a momentous step forward in its age-long evolution or prolong its travail and descend into chaos and havoc. It is a moment in history in which the world's religions may play a unique part, renouncing all "claims to exclusivity or finality" that have suffocated unity and promoted hatred and violence.[73] In a letter addressed in 1906 to Jane Elizabeth Whyte, wife of the former Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained the need for humanity to unite on many levels, describing "unity in religion" as the "corner-stone" of the process of unifying humankind.[74] Increasingly, others have seen this same need. Unity in religion requires all believers to make some sacrifices. Bausani has written that such sacrifices "should be made in equal measure by the adherents of all religious traditions."[75] Rabbi Singer noted, in his comments at the Day of Prayer, that only "through *sacrifices* for peace" can religions begin to change humanity.[76] Those sacrifices may imply not only the abandonment of any fear of syncretism or of losing one's identity of faith but also the acceptance of a possible

> conversion of numbers of people from one religion to another. Whether or not this is true, it is surely of peripheral importance when set against the opportunity that history has at last opened to those who are conscious of a world that transcends this terrestrial one—and against the responsibility that this awareness imposes.[77]

Individual religious leaders or communities that have understood the vital importance of unity for the supreme good of the whole world should find it relatively easy to abandon the exclusivist and inclusivist positions "that there can only be one true—or at least fully true—religion."[78] They will accept the ideas of religious

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[73] The Universal House of Justice, "Challenge to the World's Religious Leaders," *World Order* 33.4 (Summer 2002): 13.
[74] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 32.
[75] Bausani, *Saggi* 203.
[76] Testimonies for Peace, Rabbi Israel Singer [emphasis added].
[77] The Universal House of Justice, "Challenge to the World's Religious Leaders," *World Order* 33.4 (Summer 2002): 14.
[78] Hick, "Only one true religion?," *The Bahá'í Studies Review* 10 (2001/2002) 1.

pluralism, including the ideas "that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one"; "that the truth underlying all religions is in its essence one"; that "an inherent feature of the scriptures of most of the major faiths would appear to be the expression, in some form or other, of the principle of religion's evolutionary nature"; and that "the seminal force in the civilising of human nature has been the influence of the succession of these Manifestations of the Divine [the founders of the universal religions] that extends back to the dawn of recorded history"—ideas that will finally help all believers and nonbelievers to live peacefully together in the world.[79]

The present moment is propitious for such a renewal in the minds and hearts of all the world's religious leaders because, as the Universal House of Justice writes,

> It is evident that growing numbers of people are coming to realise that the truth underlying all religions is in its essence one. This recognition arises not through a resolution of theological disputes, but as an intuitive awareness born from the ever widening experience of others and from a dawning acceptance of the oneness of the human family itself. Out of the welter of religious doctrines, rituals and legal codes inherited from vanished worlds, there is emerging a sense that spiritual life, like the oneness manifest in diverse nationalities, races and cultures, constitutes one unbounded reality equally accessible to everyone. In order for this diffuse and still tentative perception to consolidate itself and contribute effectively to the building of a peaceful world, it must have the wholehearted confirmation of those to whom, even at this late hour, masses of the earth's population look for guidance.[80]

For Bahá'ís, this is the next step to take in interfaith dialogue: to move toward the establishment of a "world community . . . in which the clamour of religious fanaticism and strife will have been forever stilled" because the "causes of religious strife will . . . [have been] permanently removed."[81] When all conflicts among

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[79] The Universal House of Justice, "Challenge to the World's Religious Leaders," *World Order* 33.4 (Summer 2002): 16, 13, 14, 12.

[80] The Universal House of Justice, "Challenge to the World's Religious Leaders," *World Order* 33.4 (Summer 2002): 13.

[81] Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters,* new ed. (Wilmette, IL.:

religions and their leaders have disappeared and established their credibility among human beings, they can play their part in the spiritualisation of a world that has become chiefly indifferent. This enterprise is vital to avoid other pains and ills of a grievously tested humankind. The dangers, should the world's religions fail to perceive and exercise their responsibility, are well-nigh unimaginable, even in a world inured to carnage. In its letter to the world's religious leaders, the Universal House of Justice puts the case succinctly:

> The crisis calls on religious leadership for a break with the past as decisive as those that opened the way for society to address equally corrosive prejudices of race, gender and nation. Whatever justification exists for exercising influence in matters of conscience lies in serving the well-being of humankind.[82]

Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991) 41, 204.

[82] The Universal House of Justice, "Challenge to the World's Religious Leaders," *World Order* 33.4 (Summer 2002): 16.