

## Preface<sup>1</sup>

In both the Old and New Testaments, we can identify a process of uninterrupted discernment.<sup>2</sup> It is observed in several contexts, though the discerning authors differ in terms of chronology and circumstances, content and forms of language, as well as according to the individuals or objects involved in the process of discernment.

The religious discernment referred to in this context is not part of the theological debate, which is often confined to the “Theology

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<sup>1</sup> The project has been developed and submitted by a team of professors of the Pontifical Urban University: T. Abraha, É.-N. Bassoumboul, B. Kanakappally, G. Rizzi, G. Sabetta, with the external support of Prof. G. Bellia (Camporotondo Etneo [Ct], January 5, 1948 - Catania, March 12, 2020) and P.F. Fumagalli. Round tables were conducted at the International Center for Mission and Formation (CIAM) in 2017 according to a seminar format. The proceedings, coordinated by Prof. Fr. Fabrizio Meroni, CIAM Director and Secretary General of the Pontifical Missionary Union at the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, delineated all the various aspects of the study assigned to the expertise of each of the professors. The different analyses were subsequently presented for discussion in a final seminar. The study that follows, as well as the individual parts, are the result of the collaboration and approval of the Faculty of the Pontifical Urban University. This volume (with the exception of G. Sabetta’s essay) was translated into English by Cristiana Conti, with the collaboration of Jeffrey A. Easton (unless otherwise specified, all quotations are free translations).

<sup>2</sup> The formulation “First Testament” should be avoided because, for Muslims, the Qur’an is the final and conclusive message of the *Miqra’ot* (i.e., Scriptures) of Judaism, and of the Old and New Testaments for Christians. If we were to adopt the expression First Testament in place of the Christian Old Testament, then we would inevitably acknowledge the misperception that after the First Testament, there will be another one and consequently we would legitimize Muslims to believe in the existence of a “Third Testament,” i.e., the Qur’an as the ultimate testimony of the two preceding Testaments. As for the expression “Old Testament,” it should be considered neither disrespectful nor delegitimizing of the Jewish *Miqra’ot*. This expression is rooted in an unbroken Christian tradition in all the Christian Churches, both western and eastern. Such Christian tradition differs in terms of both the number of sacred texts and the linguistic forms of the different ancient versions of Scripture with regard to the specificity of the Masoretic text in Judaism. Nevertheless, this tradition is characterized by hermeneutics that is focused specifically on Jesus, unlike the Hebrew *Miqra’ot*.

of Religions or *with* Religions.” Rather, it reflects current trends in the field, while also maintaining a distinctively Christian-Catholic perspective that does not prioritize an intrinsic natural reason.

Being exhaustive on this subject is practically impossible, and a preliminary biblical approach may be unnecessary. However, one aspect requires further elaboration, namely, discernment within the interreligious sphere.

Discernment is a human activity, even if not entirely human, and deals with the cultural and religious experiences of our time. Viewed from a Christian perspective, the process of discernment focuses on a contemporary secular culture that is marked by an indisputable “laicist” dimension within the “global West,” which exists also among the many Jewish faiths (also known as Judaism), Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and traditional African religions. Another similar demarcation of the field is given by an emphasis on the specific role of the ministry of the Vatican Dicastery of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples – to which the Pontifical Urban University also belongs – which calls on us to consider the issue of interreligious discernment in light of the guidelines adopted by the Pontifical Mission Societies, belonging to the same Vatican Dicastery.

A discernment of interreligious experience, especially in the ecclesiastical circumscriptions where the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples operates, which is about to draw lessons from its four hundred years of existence (1622-2022), should also include the galaxy of “religious sects.” However, their fragmentation, phenomenology, and straightforward classification would require further elaboration.

Such delimitation of the field in part reflects the framework of *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relations of the Church with Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council, which was adopted fifty-four years ago at the Council Hall in Rome, on 26 October 1965.<sup>3</sup> That it has endured for a half-century is no small feat,

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<sup>3</sup> The Council document *Nostra Aetate*, as is well known, is the result of an elaborate redaction: paragraph 4, on “Jewish religion” (861-868), provides the starting point for the subsequent Declaration, which, for reasons of completeness, included appropriate references to Hinduism, Buddhism (paragraph 2, 856-858), and “Islamic religion” (paragraph 3, 859-860). The Declaration was then complemented by an “Introduction” on the nature of the Church’s relations with non-Christian religions (paragraph 1, 853-855), and by a conclusion on “Universal

considering the pace of the political, cultural, and religious changes taking place in our time. Nevertheless, while the essential and ongoing value of the Council's Declaration must be recognized, it is in keeping with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council to make necessary adjustments.

In itself, opening up discernment to the secular culture, along with its contemporary "laicist" shift in the global West, does not necessarily spill out into other thematic areas, as each religion, Christianity included, engages in different ways with the secular culture of the global West. Moreover, it should be recognized that the latter exerts deep hermeneutical pressure on religions. It is clear to all that secular Western culture presumes to interpret religion as if it had the key to it, seeking to confine its expressions to ancestral or traditional cultural forms, which are today considered inadequate to understand reality. Secular culture, as a global and holistic interpretation of reality, seeks to replace religion itself with a "non-religious religion," one that seeks to be free of preconceived notions. At the same time, it also strives to map out both how and in which context ancient or traditional religions can continue to operate.

The divide between this demand and an awareness of it inevitably leads to unpredictable scenarios, to resistance, and perhaps even to a withdrawal, which is to this day still unthinkable.

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Fraternity" (paragraph 5, 869-871). There are other references on the ecclesiological significance of relations with the Jewish people (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* 16), and on the continuity and unity of the Christian Scriptures with the Jewish Scriptures as revealed to the peoples of the Mosaic Alliance (Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* 14; P.F. FUMAGALLI, *Dialogo ebraico-cristiano*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milano 2013, 21-22). There is a relevant reference also on the Islamic religion, "In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind" (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* 16).