

RESPONSE TO  
CARDINAL SCOLA'S  
HOUSE OF LORDS  
SPEECH

*Religion, Plurality  
& the Common Good:  
The Work of  
the Oasis Foundation*

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## FOREWORD

**I**N HIS SPEECH at the House of Lords on 15 November 2012, to which the following text published today served as a response, Cardinal Angelo Scola introduced the work of the Oasis Foundation by offering his frank reflections on the presence of Muslims in Europe. This was addressed positively as a factor that contributed to the construction of a ‘good life’ for all communities, on the one hand, whilst on the other, stated negatively that the mere presence of Muslims in Europe constituted a potentially inassimilable problem and a challenge to the status quo.

I do not intend to recite the main points of the Cardinal’s speech here, as it can be easily accessed elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> but would wish to situate the context of these reflections in a more positive light and in pursuance of the Qur’anic command to call those not of the faith to a common word. The Roman Church has a long history of positive engagement with Islam,

and Muslims. An important witness of this engagement can be seen in the work of Louis Massignon (d.1963) whose influence helped to expand the conciliar document *Nostra Aetate* to include the Muslims and not just the Jews, as well as the work of Denise Masson and Roger Arnaldez. Massignon called for a rapprochement based on common respect between the three faiths descended from Abraham. This 'Abrahamic' inheritance put paid the notion of a Judeo-Christian heritage or culture showing it to be an unjustified reduction of a more properly called Judeo-Christian-Islamic inheritance. This perspective has led to a recalibration of theological understanding within the work of recent mainstream Catholic theologians such as Fr Claude Geffré OP and Fr David Burrell, serving as an exciting and constructive development to a future and more fundamental theological dialogue of the three faiths.

Any fruitful engagement demands three qualities, namely, love of God, good faith and intelligence. St Augustine tells us that we must love intelligence, *intellectum valde ama*, but this we can do only when we give to intelligence its full scope. The social philosophies of both faiths as to the social order, the nature of vocation, and the rule of subsidiarity present a rich

tapestry of confluent possibilities for discourse and analysis that may strengthen mutual respect and common purpose.

Any intellectual deliberation on these matters must also be wedded to the practical consequences in the economic and professional spheres. This reassertion of the inseparability of thinking and acting can go a long way in providing succinct solutions that can be integrated respectively into each faith. It is to appropriate the notion of what St Cyprian meant when he said: *As for us, we are philosophers not in word but in act; we do not say great things but we do live them.*<sup>2</sup>



IN THE NAME OF ALLAH,  
MOST BENEFICENT, MOST MERCIFUL

I WOULD LIKE to thank His Eminence for the initiative that he seeks to bring forward today, and especially for the endorsement and call in his conclusion for a shared determination of the common good. This call is in the spirit of longstanding papal encyclicals, such as *Divini Redemptoris*,<sup>3</sup> *Mater et Magistra*,<sup>4</sup> *Pacem in Terris*,<sup>5</sup> *Centesimus Annus*,<sup>6</sup> and *Caritas in Veritate*<sup>7</sup> that exhort the faithful, theists, and the human family to make a joint stand for the sake of the common good.

I think it is helpful though to make a distinction at the outset between Muslims and Islam, and Christians and Christianity. This conflation has recently led to a significant proportion of easy judgment and facile thought, wrongly identifying extremes within each respective faith as norms. On this point one must remember that religion may sometimes be a light to

illumine the world but very seldom a floodlight that can dispel all darkness.

Islam is a religion founded on a metaphysical order, which empowers degrees of spirituality that comprehensively embrace the heart of a peasant as well as an aristocrat, the illiterate as well as the poet, guiding them each to a real relationship with Being. Islam, therefore, is not an academic religion, to be plumbed by social policy monographs and analytic briefs. Although conviction for Muslims has always been attained through a distinctive form of research, namely prayer, any meaningful dialogue with the faith demands a commitment to theological and metaphysical discourse. This by definition excludes the intellectual parvenu.

One should also keep in mind that Christianity began as an Eastern religion, developing into a Universal Church in its Roman Catholic expression. Similarly the wide dispersion of Islam as a world faith and civilization beyond the Arabian Peninsula testifies to its universality. These are facts that should give caution to those who would diminish the historical catholicity, one could say, of either in an attempt to accommodate particular regional, philosophical, political, or even theological agendas.

Islam of course is not new to the West, neither intellectually nor demographically, and the idea that Muslims are latecomers to the European scene is also incorrect. The near 500-year Ottoman presence in the Balkans, lasting until 1913, attests to a principal cultural participation in the European narrative. The allegation that Islam's universal truth claim somehow disentitles adherents from living in a pluralist society is wholly contradicted by the historical record and confuses the two realms of theology and law. In fact, Islam has been a constitutionally recognized religion by the Austrian State from as early as 1912.<sup>8</sup> Neither are Islamic nation states in the recent history of Europe entirely unknown, as in the Kingdom of Albania, dismantled by fascist aggression in 1939. It is also sometimes unhelpful, but always a-historical, to frame the discourse of the presence of Islam in Europe merely at the level of the accommodation of Muslim guest-workers exasperatingly at odds with a contemporary moral cosmopolitanism.

The intellectual roots of Christian Europe bear witness to a far more intimate relation of the two faiths in the maintenance of a shared understanding and vision of the World as a

manifestation of a Beneficent Creator. It should also be noted that at the height of medieval fervour the ever-present theological differences between the two faiths failed to deter the common formation of a philosophical *lingua franca*,<sup>9</sup> setting effectively the foundations for the development of scholastic theology in the West.

The present European context is critical to situating the important and corrective role of Christianity needed in political society today.<sup>10</sup> The socio-economic disasters that certain inspired papal encyclicals foresaw and warned of in the last century have now come to fruition.<sup>11</sup> Europe has inadvertently lost much of its cultural identity in the rush to create a new globalist and secularist technopolis in the post-War period. The current respectable and mainstream rise of neo-fascism as a reaction to economic disorder, abetted by an assertion of pseudo-cultural identity, can be worryingly observed right across Europe. This is likely to increase as it did in the time of the Great Depression, and just like the 1930s, Christianity is likely to be used once again to justify identity politics.

In this scheme, fortress Europe becomes Christian Europe staving off the barbarian hordes, as the espousal of a nominal Christian identity aided by an imaginative media increas-

ingly furthers a cause that is the antithesis of Christianity itself. Any pronouncements and rhetoric, therefore, that identify the non-Christian as synonymous with the foreigner creates a world where religious exclusivity is likely to be expressed as nationalist exclusivity. One would like to take comfort therefore in the universal nature of the Church, whose vision is correspondingly *sub specie aeterni* and one would hope never expedient.

#### CHALLENGES TO THE STATUS QUO

Following upon these observations, I would like to venture that the notion of a status quo purportedly disturbed *by the mere presence of Muslims*, as contended by His Eminence, invites further examination. This is not in order to identify the purported sources of antagonism, compelling as they may be, but more essentially to investigate the framing of such a proposition in the current European mindscape. The conception of a status quo in this context is in effect coterminous or synonymous with Rousseau's General Will, and which according to Rousseau, is always right (*ha sempre ragione*), as it comes from all and must therefore apply to all, regardless of inherent particular wills. For Rousseau's *Contrat Social*, a treatise that caused much unpleasantness in the

last century and likely to produce more unpleasantness in this one, laws or norms are defined by the expression of the General Will, to be determined by numbers and never by reason. Reasonableness however is the guarantor of justice, as all legislators would agree, and consequently the question to be asked is not whether the status quo has been disturbed but whether the status quo is reasonable, and if reasonable, then just. Justice however will only be served when there is direct recognition that God is the sole author of the Order of Nature and not the will of man, no matter how 'religious' man might be.

The purported challenge to the status quo, according to His Eminence, is due to two reasons. The first is the fact that Islam cannot be understood as an internal variant of Christianity. The other is that Islam holds firm to a universal truth claim, unlike other Eastern religions, and that Muslims by their mere presence pose the problem of the co-existence of differing universal world visions in the public sphere. There is an assumption here that the status quo in Europe is held by the Christian truth claim, and secondarily, that the dominant secularist world view does not itself proclaim a competing universal truth claim, in effect more forcefully than either Islam or Christianity as it is backed by powerful legal

provisions and constitutional arrangements. Given this, and given that the four schools of Islamic law decree that the rule of law within any polity inhabited by the Muslim minorities is to be upheld *de fide*, it is difficult to see where Islam can be an obstacle to the status quo.

The fact that Islam cannot be viewed as an internal variant of Christianity is largely irrelevant if the status quo is as averred, since such a distinction is incapable of amounting to a constitutional threat on that basis. This brings us to the subject of truth claims. Islam could be said to have a universal truth claim, but in accordance with the Shari'ah and the centuries held traditional understanding and practice by Muslim scholars, this truth claim cannot be forced on others and can only be maintained by an independent volitional act. In other words, Islamic laws can never be enforced against those that do not voluntarily accept or adhere to them. The secular worldview therefore in place in Europe cannot be challenged by the *mere presence of Muslims*, since the practice of the Muslims and their cultural life is assured and accommodated *de jure* under the system. *De facto*, however, Muslim places of worship remain circumscribed in countries such as Italy<sup>12</sup> and France, and freedom of choice as regards Islamic dress is often

restricted in line with prejudicial and largely racist views.

### SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

The encyclicals at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century possess a compelling message for the economic and ecological anxieties faced today.<sup>13</sup> Their teachings served to reinstate the timeless and traditional understanding of the social order, the organicism of religious adherence, and the reassertion of the sacrality of everyday life. The social philosophy thus restated is still valid today despite social and political changes that have taken place in the last hundred or so years. This is because its principles address the human condition, which remains unchanging in as far as man's ontological station can never change. This philosophy engaged with the science of political economy as sub-species of ethics. Its vitality stemmed from the call to establish sustainable land associations as well as vocational orders, reasserting natural hierarchies imbued with the principle of subsidiarity. The current socio-political climate has made the dissemination of this philosophy timely. There is nothing here, furthermore, that a Muslim would not actively and enthusiastically put his shoulder to,

in the ordinary pursuit of his beliefs and religious aspirations. This could logically serve as an effective and potent illustration of *métissage*.

The above follows from the reality that the science of first principles is naturally non-denominational, and can be appealed to by both faiths without inviting any theological vexation. In this light, the principle of communication suggested by His Eminence is a welcome one, but requires a clear purpose or end rooted in these shared first principles. It is difficult to ascertain therefore why the communication of conflicting truth claims impliedly furthers the risk of conflict between the two faiths. One risks, on the contrary, being left with force of circumstance as a *raison d'être* of affiliation, which will always be more relational than substantial, and ultimately superficial.

In the light of this, it is difficult to understand why the interlocution between Islam and Catholicism should invariably be relegated to the bargain basement floor of dialogue rather than left to flourish in the boardrooms of metaphysics, the traditional arts, natural philosophy or even music. I would like to briefly suggest a theme for Oasis that might be a constructive theological discourse to develop for the sake of future dialogue with other faiths. This is the

possible question that the act of broad faith,<sup>14</sup> as possessed by Muslims according to Catholicism, can possess a supernatural nature and can further contain within itself the desire for strict faith,<sup>15</sup> *in voto*, and therefore possess saving power.<sup>16</sup> As the formal objects of strict faith (God as supremely wise and true) and virtual faith (God as ontological truth) are identical, some Catholic theologians have gone on to assert that God is willing to accept an act of virtual faith when a soul is incapable of the formal act of faith.<sup>17</sup> I know that many Muslims would be interested to see this thesis developed.<sup>18</sup>

The present economic crisis affecting much of Europe gives a great deal of scope for the delineation of an intelligent and combined response by both faiths. Since all serious political and sociological thinking reposes ultimately on a theory of human nature, it is this latter formulation that will render any socio-political reality intelligible. Our economic system currently rests on a theory in which the materialist idea of luxury, wealth, and leisure are considered the main ends of man. This is attached to a false philosophy that views work as a necessary evil rather than a vocation, answering a divine call to service. An opportune response to this fallacy would be to respectively

portray and clarify the relationship between belief and practice, intellect and act, idea and consequence, and thus uphold and empower man's natural duty to intellectual and moral responsibility in the modern world. This is in line with the guiding principle that both faiths can recognize, namely that freedom can never be incompatible with discipline but will always be incompatible with irresponsibility.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/node/8815>.

<sup>2</sup> Henri De Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956), p.225.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Pius XI, 19/3/1937.

<sup>4</sup> Pope John XXIII, 15/5/1961.

<sup>5</sup> Pope John XXIII, 11/4/1963.

<sup>6</sup> Pope John Paul II, 1/5/1991.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, 29/6/2009.

<sup>8</sup> Referred to as the Islam Law, promulgated by Franz Joseph I. In 1867, a law guaranteed freedom for all religions in the Catholic Austro-Hungarian Empire. After the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, Muslims were gathered into the Empire from formerly Ottoman lands. In 1887, the first mosque was built with government assistance in Vienna. In 1979, Article 1 of the Act of Recognition recognised Muslims in Austria as belonging to the Religious Body. In 1989, Austria amended the Law of Islam to accept the four schools of law on an equal footing. Veiling is protected by the Constitution as a right, and so is Islamic religious education in state institutions.

<sup>9</sup> This can be adverted to, for example, in the Aquinas and “the Arabs” Programme initiated by Professor Richard Taylor at Louvain University.

<sup>10</sup> In other words, that it can reprise itself as an indigenous moral force that can mitigate the contemporary moral vacuum of the political realm in Europe.

<sup>11</sup> *Rerum Novarum* (15/5/1891), *Quadragesimo Anno* (15/5/1931).

<sup>12</sup> Mosque building is not permitted in Milan, for example. due to pressure from the Northern League.

<sup>13</sup> See *inter alia* the works of Bishop Ketteler of Mainz, Karl von Vogelsang of Austria, and the Marquis de la Tour du Pin in France.

<sup>14</sup> The certainty of reason regarding God.

<sup>15</sup> The faith necessary for salvation.

<sup>16</sup> See Fr Constantin Gutberlet’s continuation of Johann Heinrich’s *Dogmatische Theologie*, Vol. VIII (Mainz: Franz Kirchheim, 1897), p.502. The Austrian theologian also reaffirms that the damnation of those who are ignorant of the revelation is a theological thesis and not a definition laid down by the Church. See also Riccardo Lombardi SJ, *The Salvation of the Unbeliever* (London: Burns & Oates, 1956), p.60.

<sup>17</sup> For example the Austrian fathers Ludwig Lercher and Florian Schlagenhafen in their *Institutiones Theologiae Dogmaticae: in usum scholarum*, Vol. I (Innsbruck: F. Rauch, 1939), p.428. See Lombardi, *Ibid*, p.59.

<sup>18</sup> This is meant in the sense that the exclusivity of the Church can be ameliorated to allow a beneficial dialogue between itself and Islam.





