

Pope Francis and Islam: three cornerstones of his teaching

Andrea Tornielli, *Vatican News*, 11 March 2021



There is a common thread linking three important interventions of Pope Francis regarding interreligious dialogue, and Islam in particular.

It is a magisterium that indicates a road map with three fundamental points of reference:

- the role of religion in our societies,
- the criterion of authentic religiosity, and
- the concrete way to walk as brothers and sisters to build peace.

We find them in the speeches that the Pope gave in Azerbaijan in 2016; in Egypt in 2017; and now during his historic trip to Iraq, in the unforgettable meeting in Ur of the Chaldeans, the city of Abraham.

The interlocutors of the first speech were the Azerbaijani Shiites, but also the other religious communities of the country. The second speech was mainly addressed to the Egyptian Sunni Muslims. Finally, the third was addressed to a wider interreligious audience made of a Muslim majority, yet including not only Christians but also representatives of the ancient Mesopotamian religions.

What Pope Francis is proposing and implementing is not an approach that forgets differences and identities in order to equalize all. Instead, it is a call to be faithful to one's own religious identity in order to reject any instrumentalization of religion to foment hatred, division, terrorism, discrimination, and at the same time, to witness in increasingly secularized societies that we need God.

In Baku, before the Sheikh of the Muslims of the Caucasus and representatives of other religious communities in the country, Pope Francis recalled the “great task” of religions: that of “accompanying men and women looking for the meaning of life, helping them to understand that the limited capacities of the human being and the goods of this world must never become absolutes.”

In Cairo, speaking at the International Conference for Peace promoted by the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, Al Tayyeb, Pope Francis said that Mount Sinai “reminds us above all that authentic covenants on earth cannot ignore heaven, that human beings cannot attempt to encounter one another in peace by eliminating God from the horizon, nor can they climb the mountain to appropriate God for themselves.” It was a very timely message in the face of what the Pope

called a “dangerous paradox,” namely, on the one hand, the tendency to relegate religion only to the private sphere, “as if it were not an essential dimension of the human person and society”; and on the other, the inappropriate confusion between the religious and political spheres.

In Ur, on Saturday, March 6, Francis recalled that if humans “exclude God, they end up worshipping the things of this earth,” inviting them to raise “their eyes to Heaven” and defining as “true religiosity,” that which worships God and loves one’s neighbor. In Cairo, the Pope explained that religious leaders are called “to unmask the violence that masquerades as purported sanctity and is based more on the ‘absolutizing’ of selfishness than on authentic openness to the Absolute” and to “denounce violations of human dignity and human rights, to expose attempts to justify every form of hatred in the name of religion, and to condemn these attempts as idolatrous caricatures of God.”

In Baku, the Pope had highlighted as the task of religions that of helping “to discern the good and put it into practice through deeds, prayer and diligent cultivation of the inner life, they are called to build a *culture of encounter and peace*, based on patience, understanding, and humble, tangible steps.” In a time of conflict, religions - the Pope said in Azerbaijan - “must be dawns of peace, seeds of rebirth amid the devastation of death, echoes of dialogue resounding unceasingly, paths to encounter and reconciliation reaching even those places where official mediation efforts seem not to have borne fruit.”

In Egypt, he had explained that “no incitement to violence will guarantee peace” and that “In order to prevent conflicts and build peace, it is essential that we spare no effort in eliminating situations of poverty and exploitation where extremism more easily takes root.” These words were also echoed in Ur’s speech: “There will be no peace without sharing and acceptance, without a justice that ensures equity and advancement for all, beginning with those most vulnerable. There will be no peace unless peoples extend a hand to other peoples.”

The three papal interventions thus indicate the role that religiosity has today in a world where consumerism and rejection of the sacred prevail, and where there is a tendency to relegate faith to the private sphere. But there is a need, Pope Francis explains, for an authentic religiosity, one that never separates adoration of God from love for our brothers and sisters.

Finally, the Pope indicates a way for religions to contribute to the good of our societies, recalling the need for a commitment to the cause of peace, and to respond to the problems and concrete needs of the least, the poor, the defenseless. It is the proposal to walk side by side, “as brothers and sisters”, in order to be concrete artisans of peace and justice, beyond differences and respecting respective identities.

An example of this path was cited by Pope Francis when he recalled the help offered by young Muslims to their Christian brothers in defending the churches in Baghdad. Another example was offered by the testimony in Ur of Rafah Hussein Baher, an Iraqi woman of the Sabean-Mandean religion, who, in her testimony, wanted to recall the sacrifice of Najay, a man of Sabean-Mandean religion from Basra, who lost his life to save that of his Muslim neighbor.