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Spirit, Word and Love: Insights of Pietro Rossano towards a Mystical Theology of the Christian-Muslim Dialogue

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Abstract: Pietro Rossano was an important protagonist of interreligious dialogue in the 20th century, serving for more than twenty years in the Vatican office in charge of this field. His experience and writings show how dialogue has many anthropological and theological dimensions and, because we are talking about an event between religious people, dialogue also has a mystical dimension. Rossano was very involved in the dialogue with Muslims, both in the theoretical study and in some meetings, like the one in Tripoli in 1976 and others. Spirit, Word and Love can be seen as the three keys to interpreting Rossano's testimony in relation to the Bible, to dialogical thought—in particular, Ferdinand Ebner—and to the Christian theology of dialogue.

Keywords: Pietro Rossano; interreligious dialogue; Islam; mystical theology; Ferdinand Ebner

1. Introduction

Pietro Rossano was one of the protagonists of interreligious dialogue in the 20th century. Born in Vezza d'Alba, in Piedmont (Italy), on 25 April 1923, besides being a biblical scholar and a professor, from 1964 to 1983 he worked at the then newly founded Vatican office of the *Secretariat for Non-Christians*, between 1988 and 2022 known as *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* and beginning with 2022, *Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue*. Subsequently, he was auxiliary bishop of Rome and Rector of the Pontifical Lateran University, until his death on 15 June 1991 (Osto 2019).

Every day I say a little prayer for the Muslims and I confess that one of the objectives of my life is that one day the Church, understood as the people of God, may take the same step towards the Muslims as towards the Jews: to recognize the “*spirituale vinculum*” (*spiritual link*) that exists between them and us. This will be a great day for all humanity, for the Church and for Islam, and I believe for world peace. (Rossano 1991, p. 37)

This quotation is perhaps the best way to open this text, which aims to highlight Pietro Rossano's contribution to a mystical theology of a Christian-Muslim dialogue. The study we propose consists of three steps. We will summarize, firstly, Rossano's contribution to interreligious dialogue, secondly, his particular contribution to Islamic-Christian dialogue and, finally, some emphases on the mystical dimension.

2. Between Experience, Service and Research

Among the Christian protagonists of the interreligious dialogue in the 20th century, Pietro Rossano stands out for three general characteristics. First of all, Rossano has been a *participant* in the dialogue for over 20 years: he traveled, met hundreds of people, organized initiatives and instances of dialogue, participated in dozens of bilateral and multilateral dialogues, and had been approached by numerous institutions and personalities from other religions and Christian Churches. A first characteristic, therefore, is that of *the primacy of experience* as a womb that led to witness and then to critical reflection. Starting from the four forms of dialogue—life, spirituality, theology, praxis—described in the important Catholic documents *Dialogue and Mission* of 1984 and then *Dialogue and Proclamation* of 1991, we can



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say that Rossano was a formidable protagonist of the dialogue of life. The numerous photos of him, together with other religious leaders, in places of worship belonging to various religions, the diaries and travel reports, and the numerous signs of esteem and gratitude that have emerged on several occasions, such as at the time of his death, are testament to the enormous depth of Rossano's dialogue experience, entrusted to the memory of those who met him and to the gratitude of those who can know its scope through his writings (Osto 2019, pp. 381–448).

A second characteristic is linked to the fact that from his youth, Rossano cultivated a great curiosity for various religious experiences and a capacity for dialogue in the various contexts in which he lived (the Seminary of Alba, studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, teaching at the seminary in Alba and cultural activities in Alba). With his appointment in 1964 by Pope Paul VI to be part of the new Vatican department of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, dialogue became for Rossano an ecclesial service, a real ministry lived by mandate of the Pope, well described by the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*: "Dialogue thrives on friendship, and most especially on service". (no. 87). In this sense, one of the expressions addressed by Pope John Paul II to Rossano, and which he quoted in an unpublished letter of 5 April 1979 to his friend Don Paolo Tablino, is very intense: "I have visited the Pope and I wrote him after the encyclical that strengthens and corroborates the dialogue [*Redemptor hominis*]. The other day he visited our office and stopped by to thank me for the good picture I gave him of the non-Christian world: "You love the Church through non-Christians". As for the Church in the world, it is in a state of crucifixion and resurrection, as 'it is written'". (Osto 2019, p. 52, footnote 40).

Finally, *research* There are over four hundred titles signed by Rossano, although most of them are pieces of short writing. The theme of interreligious dialogue is one of his major areas of research and publication (Rossano 1975, 1988b, 2002), along with biblical studies—particularly on Saint Paul (Rossano 1988a)—and on the relationship between Christianity and culture (Rossano 1985). Other theologians from the 20th century have published many more contributions on the theology of religions than Rossano, but in the case of the Piedmont theologian, the added value of his writings is that they are closely linked to a concrete lived experience of dialogue.

3. The Dialogues between Christians and Muslims

The range of encounters experienced by Rossano would be unimaginable nowadays. In fact, interreligious dialogue is now operated in a differentiated and specialized way according to different interlocutors, and it is impossible to take part in a qualified manner in more than a single type of bilateral dialogue. Rossano, a pioneer in the official dialogue of the Catholic Church, was able to engage in all fronts of encounters with other believers: Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, and also with monks from different traditions (Osto 2019, pp. 381–448).

The dialogues with Muslims represent one of the richest and also troubled chapters of Rossano's experience (Osto 2019, pp. 417–33). A comprehensive and authoritative look at this aspect is offered to us by Maurice Borrmans (1925–2017), White Father, one of the most significant figures in this field, who wrote about our author (Borrmans 1992b):

It was during this period [1964–1982] that I got to know the man, appreciate the theologian and admire the "servant of dialogue". In fact, he was the one who, in the early period of the Secretariat, sustained the publication (in Italian, English, French and sometimes Spanish) of a series of "theological-pastoral guidelines" for dialogue with Muslims. [...] The synthesis of Bishop Rossano's experience with regard to Islamic-Christian dialogue can be found in the beautiful presentation that opens the new edition (*Secretariatus de Non-Christianis* 1969) of *Guidelines for Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims*. (Rossano 1982a)

The text quoted by Borrmans says:

This book is fruit of much science, much experience and above all much weighting in order to find and say the “right word” about our Muslim sisters and brothers. And the right word is the one that is guided and pervaded by love. This book, which was born out of love, intends to promote the “civilization of love”, which will only be possible when the other can recognize himself faithfully in the image one gives of him. The truth of mutual knowledge and relationships is in direct proportion to the love one has for the other. Only thus can the gap that always exists between one’s understanding of the other (hetero-interpretation) and the knowledge he has of himself (self-interpretation) be overcome. Dialogue and communication can only truly take place when self-interpretation and hetero-interpretation coincide in love [. . .].

This aspect is particularly important in relations between Christians and Muslims because the images we carry of each other do not correspond to how we feel about each other. Among the great world religions, Islam is certainly the one for which unprejudiced consideration is most difficult for the Westerner’. (Borrmans 1992a, pp. 174–76)

3.1. Rossano’s Writings on Islamic-Christian Dialogue

Rossano’s writings on Islamic-Christian dialogue are quite a large group consisting of a heterogeneous contribution. It is interesting to note the time span, between 1969 and 1991, of the various texts, testifying to a long interest that spans very different eras. The contributions should be placed in three contexts: the activities of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, the Islamic-Christian Colloquium in Tripoli in 1976 and some initiatives of the Community of St. Egidio.

The Secretariat from 1967 started to send a message for the feast of the end of Ramadan. The first to take up this initiative was Fr. J. Cuoq (Lanfry 1989). This message was always published both in the *Bulletin* and from 1975 in *Islamochristiana* (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 2000).

Tomorrow is *id el fitr*, the feast of the conclusion of *Ramadan*; as always, the Secretariat sends a message (which I don’t like this year; I was absent when it was prepared); I won’t hide the fact that we are concerned about the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism (Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia) as a response to our dialogue: a sign of weakness? A sign that they have been touched? Patience and prayer (*Letter to Paolo Tablino*, 2 September 1978).

Furthermore, starting in 1974 with the Pignedoli presidency, the section of the Secretariat dedicated to dialogue with Muslims was better organized.

First of all, Rossano emphasizes the Church’s appreciation and esteem for Islam.

The sincere appreciation of Islam is prompted by religious motives, unrelated to any political strategy. There is a dominant theme: submission to the same one and only Creator God, recognized by the Qur’an (*Sura 29:45*: ‘our God and your God is one and we are subject to him’) and the magisterium of Vatican II (*‘nobiscum Deum adorant’*, LG 16). This creates a bond of ‘brotherhood’ on which is based a similar vision of the human person, of the foundations of ethics and of missionary commitment in the service of man and for the glory of God, the promotion of goodness and liberation from evil, to use the terminology of the Qur’an (*Sura 3.110*). (Rossano 1982a, pp. 43–44)

Rossano’s four general observations are, first, the importance of remembering what is common, without emphasizing our differences. Indeed, appreciation of Islam springs from a bond of fraternity that must always be kept in mind and nurtured (Rossano 1982a). As a second emphasis, he highlights the fact that the ecclesiastical documents possess a *particular* style (“maieutic”) in order to stimulate a different approach to Islam, trying to promote two attitudes in particular. The first attitude is that of promoting the dignity of the person, and the second is the importance of distinguishing between the political and spiritual levels

(Rossano 1982a, pp. 44–45). The third remark concerns the task of the theological evaluation of Islam, which is still at its beginnings and raises many questions about which research is still open (Rossano 1982a, p. 45). “What is the relationship between the Ummah and the Church? What is the nature of the spiritual bond that unites the disciples of Christ and the Muslims? What is the value of the ‘prophecy’ of Muhammad? What is the significance of the “revelation” in the Qur’an?” (Rossano 1982a, p. 45).

Finally, Rossano reminds us that we are inside a change of horizon. The dialogue between the Church and Islam is only at the beginning and “there is a great discrepancy and imbalance between the offer of the Church for dialogue and the historical response of Islam. But I wouldn’t want to exaggerate this discrepancy” (Rossano 1982a, p. 45).

An initial observation that emerges is the awareness of a plurality and a great differentiation of Islam and, as a consequence, of encounters and dialogues.

For the first time [in Tripoli in 1976] we Catholics became directly aware of the universality of Islam, a universality physically represented by people of different backgrounds and with an extraordinary variety: one a mufti or an ulema of Morocco or Kenya, another that of Lebanon or Malaysia . . . Certainly it was a relative “discovery”, because everyone knows that Islam is vast and varied; nevertheless it was a concrete experience that will have to be valued, and I believe that Islam should be considered as a single body yes, but *differentiated*. (Rossano 1976a, p. 393)

Just as Christianity has many facets, Islam is also differentiated taking very different forms depending on its cultural and geographical context.

The practice of dialogue has extended to the whole Church, embracing different colours and shades according to geographical areas and historical experiences. Different is the dialogue in the *Near East* and in *Egypt* where Christian communities have survived Islamic expansion as small islands, and different is the attitude of the Churches in the *Maghreb* and in *West Africa*, where Christians today appear as “guests and strangers”. [. . .] Another is the situation in *India* where Christians and Muslims find themselves in a minority situation. Still another is the dialogue between Christians and Muslims in European countries such as *France, England, Germany, Italy* where Muslims are mainly present as a working mass. Rome gave last year an example of hospitality by welcoming the first mosque in its history [the foundation stone in 1984, inaugurated in 1995]. (Rossano 1989, p. 41)

Another consideration concerns the mutual pre-understandings of Christians and Muslims, which greatly influences the dialogues, particularly the role of the two “founders”, Jesus and Muhammad (Rossano 1989, p. 43). The weight of the “founders” is very relevant and continually provokes a revision of the understanding that every believer possesses. The juxtaposition of Jesus and Muhammad is also important in order to avoid the fallacy of considering the comparison between the Bible and the Qur’an as one of the focal points of Islamic-Christian dialogue. The hermeneutics of the sacred texts of the two religions is necessary, but Christianity is, as its name implies, the following of Christ, which is attested by Scripture, but goes far beyond the interpretation of the sacred text. It is different for Islam where, on the other hand, the role of the Qur’an is different and could, in fact, be compared to the person of Jesus in terms of importance. Regarding Jesus and Muhammad, we are all aware of how, over the centuries, the perspectives of approaching and understanding their figures, and their message, have been numerous and different.

The historical mediations of the Founders imprints Islam and Christianity with irreducible characteristics despite their common spiritual structure. This is why Christians entering into dialogue often find themselves frustrated by the ambiguity of Islamic terminology, and the same is true of Muslims when dealing with Christians. Fundamental words and concepts such as faith, revelation, prophets, law, holy books, freedom, human rights, ethics, salvation have *different* connotations and evocations in the Christian and Muslim context. Hence the constant

risk of not understanding each other and of stiffening into incommunicability. (Borrmans 1992a, pp. 174–76)

A second aspect is related to the different pre-understandings, or inheritances, of each experience generating attitudes and dynamics that are sometimes problematic.

It seems to be fair to say that Islam nurtures towards the Church both feelings of attraction as of repulsion. Attraction for its unity and organization, for its educational and social services, for the moral, political and diplomatic weight it represents in the international arena and which it would like to draw on its side, for the examples of social and charitable dedication especially of the nuns, such as the figure of Mother Teresa, often quoted in the Islamic press. But stronger and deeper seems to be the repulsion. In the Islamic world, the Church is often identified with the so-called “Christian West” and with the severe judgement of the Islamic world directed against us. (Rossano 1989, p. 45)

Our author identifies a contradictory tension between “feelings of attraction and repulsion”. The observation is very pertinent and useful as it clarifies, in this case, inner assumptions, linked to attitudes, imaginaries and dimensions that greatly influence thinking and meeting.

The reasons for tension in the relationship with Islam go back a long way into the past. Especially under the influence of the Crusades in the 12th and 13th centuries, many Western scholars wanted to make the Islamic religion better known. But the picture they have drawn of Islam can best be described as “distorted”. Western views of Islam and Muslims were, for centuries, based on this “distorted image”. Even the most objective research of the last 150 years has not entirely succeeded in rectifying *the image of Islam to the current Western observer*.

The awareness of possessing a “distorted image” of the interlocutor is a fundamental step of self-awareness for any dialogue. The awareness illustrated by Rossano is a great step forward on a path of encounter that starts from a revision of ecclesial perception (Rossano, *Letter to Tablino*, 8 October 1961 and 6 July 1967).

There was indeed Cairo, which was a good experience, which made us realize the impermeability of Islam at the doctrinal level and revealed to us instead the possibilities of the ways of the heart: they rejected the term “dialogue” (*hiwar*), they denied that our theism is common with theirs, they asked us to cease the mission in Islamic territories . . . but they ask for our solidarity when referring to materialism or atheism and they are afraid of the new times; at the end of the meeting the atmosphere was truly fraternal, and now they will come to Rome . . . (Rossano, *Letter to Tablino*, 28 June 1968).

3.2. *The Islamic-Christian Meeting in Tripoli in 1976*

The Islamic-Christian meeting in Tripoli from 1 to 5 February 1976 was both of great importance and highly problematic. An important event preceding that meeting was the visit of a delegation of Saudi ulema to Rome from 24 to 27 October 1974, an event whose preparation began two years earlier. The meeting in Libya turned out to be one of the very first steps taken by the Secretariat in an official manner and the highest level of meeting with Islamic representatives since Vatican II, as can be seen from the published photo showing Pignedoli, Rossano and Gaddafi (Gaia 2003, p. 158).

I got to know Monsignor Rossano well, particularly during the famous Islamic-Christian colloquium in Tripoli in 1976. On that occasion and during the meetings I had with him and with Cardinal Pignedoli, when I was consultant to the Secretariat, I was able to notice—and deeply admire—two fundamental aspects of their attitude in dialogue with Muslims. First of all, the importance given to personal encounters, in an atmosphere of friendship and trust, in mutual respect. Then, the conviction that if we must know and affirm the doctrinal divergences that exist between the Christian faith and the Muslim faith, we must

also discover and deepen the spiritual convergences and ethical heritage, common to Christianity and Islam. I believe that today we must preserve the memory and meditate on the spiritual message of Monsignor Rossano and Cardinal Pignedoli. (Lelong 2003, p. 182)

When the above lines were written, Michel Lelong (1925–2020), a White Father, was secretary emeritus of the Secretariat for Relations with Islam of the Episcopal Conference of France. The Seminar for Islamic-Christian Dialogue in Tripoli was considered the most important meeting between Christians and Muslims in the 1970s. For the first time, the government of a Muslim-majority country, Libya, sponsored an interfaith meeting (Rossano 1976b).

When, during the night of 1 to 2 October 1975, a Vatican delegation and a Libyan one met in Tripoli in order to establish the program of the seminar for the Islamic-Christian dialogue, we immediately agreed on the following themes: (a) The faith in one unique God, Creator and Judge, is the foundation of our respective religions and morals; (b) This faith is not a pure inner feeling, but is translated into the imperatives of justice and social equality; (c) Furthermore, the faith can become, simultaneously, an inspiration and a guide for life; (d) Having admitted this, we asked ourselves how to remove the obstacles inherited from the past that prevent convergence and collaboration between Christians and Muslims for the promotion of justice and spiritual values among men. (Rossano 1979, p. 251)

The Tripoli Seminar, unfortunately, remains sadly remembered for an unexpected outcome that greatly and unjustly tarnished the reputation of the Secretariat and meant a damaging of the commitment to dialogue with Islam. In short, the unpleasant surprise that shook and strained the dialogue was the sudden and unexpected inclusion in the final declaration of the seminar, signed by all participants, of two articles that could be interpreted as a rejection or criticism of Israeli policies of those times. The Vatican, therefore, found itself embroiled in an unpleasant diplomatic crisis, which was resolved in the best possible way but, in any case, the reverberations of those events created an aura of mistrust and a compromised climate.

As far as the work programs are concerned, I must add that in Tripoli it was dramatically seen that we were still in the early stages, and that we had to proceed not in a clamorous manner, with interlocutors who were too different and came from different cultural backgrounds. (Rossano 1976a, p. 393; 1976b; Borrmans 1976)

I know from my own experience what difficulties and crises this meeting was associated with. But I believe I can say that this experience took the Christian-Islamic dialogue a decisive step forward, brought it out of its infancy. [. . .] Even today [we are writing these lines in 1989], every year at Christmas, I receive the best wishes and the testimony of friendship from the Muslim representative, who on that occasion was the fiercest and most unscrupulous opponent of the Christian positions. (Rossano 1989, p. 42)

Given the elements analyzed so far, what are the prospects for the Islamic-Christian dialogues? What emerges in our author is the perception of a germinal path and, therefore, with more gaps than acquisitions, but also the awareness that the future is open to unprecedented developments to be hoped for (Rossano 1989, p. 46). The commitment to dialogue is irrevocable and this also concerns Islam, with all the characteristics we have highlighted so far.

I do not believe that dialogue with Islam is more difficult than with other religions or Marxism. [. . .] However, the dialogue should not be conducted with religions or systems, but with people . . . [. . .] The Muslim world, and especially the Arab world, has gone through a period of colonization. [. . .] We should not forget,

however, that if Islam is less open to dialogue for these reasons, the responsibility ultimately lies with the West. (Rossano 1976a, p. 396)

This very realistic and wise observation by our author about the quality of the difficulty of Islamic-Christian dialogues is important. We place these assertions at the end of our analysis precisely to emphasize the fact that, even with the various difficulties highlighted, Islam represents a space of dialogue that requires a motivation and an energy equal to other paths of encounter.

We conclude with two statements that open up prospects for unexpected developments.

A Christian theology of Islam remains to be written: particularly problematic are the total incommunicability of God, despite his 99 beautiful names that are a jewel of Koranic spirituality, the concept of revelation from Adam to Muhammad, the nature of the holy book “descended” from heaven, and, for Christians, the Christology of the Qur’an, which presents itself as a rectification and purification of that of the New Testament. (Rossano 1983, p. 28)

Since these words were written some distance has been covered, but theological reflection still awaits many further paths. Finally, at the beginning of one of his writings, Rossano offers a very significant quotation with which we would like to conclude this paragraph.

I would like to quote Muhammad’s speech (it is better to say it like this than in the Latinized form *Mohammed*) during the famous “farewell pilgrimage”, the last one he led to Mecca, a few weeks before his death in 632; handed down by tradition, it can be considered his spiritual testament: “O People! Lend me an attentive ear, for I know not whether after this year I shall ever be amongst you again. Therefore, listen carefully to what I am saying and take these words to those who could not be present here today.” [. . .] Return the goods entrusted to you to their rightful owners. Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. Remember that you will indeed meet your Lord, and that he will indeed reckon your deeds.” [. . .] “Beware of Satan, for the safety of your religion. He has lost all hope that he will be able to lead you astray in big things so beware of following him in small things.” “O People it is true that you have certain rights with regard to your women but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as your wives only under Allah’s trust and with His permission. [. . .] “O People! No Prophet or apostle will come after me and no new faith will be born. Reason well, therefore O People! and understand words that I convey to you. I leave behind me two things, the Quran and the Sunnah and if you follow these you will never go astray.” “All those who listen to me shall pass on my words to others and those to others again; and may the last ones understand my words better than those who listen to me directly.”

“O Allah, be my witness, that I have conveyed your message to Your people.”

As part of this sermon, the prophet recited to them a revelation from Allah, which he had just received, and which completed the Quran, for it was the last passage to be revealed:

This day the disbeliever’s despair of prevailing against your religion, so fear them not, but fear Me (Allah)! This day have I perfected for you, your religion and fulfilled My favor unto you, and it hath been My good pleasure to choose Islam for you as your religion. (Surah 5, Ayah 3). (Rossano 1989, p. 28)

At the beginning of another piece of writing, Rossano urges greater awareness:

It may seem superfluous, but in our country it is not. Respect also starts with the precise pronunciation of a name. So: we say *islām* and not *islam*, and it means, in the current Muslim interpretation, “submission and peace”. Therefore, the correct name for its followers is ‘Muslims’ and not ‘Mohammedans’, the latter

designation in which they have never recognized themselves. (Rossano 1989, p. 27)

The path towards an ever more authentic and solid Islamic-Christian brotherhood is, therefore, a wish contained in the Qur'an itself.

3.3. *Jews, Christians and Muslims Spiritual Descendants of Abraham*

Among Rossano's writings, one is entirely dedicated to the Abrahamic religions, so, to Jews, Christians and Muslims who are defined as "spiritual descendants of Abraham". "A triangular dialogue between Christians, Jews and Muslims: an experience that had illustrious precedents in the Christian Middle Ages and in the golden age of the Abbasid Caliphate", (Rossano 1983, p. 21). Jews, Christians and Muslims are therefore also protagonists of a *trilateral* dialogue, in addition to the individual bilateral dialogues, our theologian, albeit in a very concise manner, mentions the fundamental elements of this journey of "sister religions".

Everyone knows that the faith of the ancient Israel is the original stock and historical root of both Christianity and Islam, but it would not be correct to consider Christianity as a daughter religion of Judaism and Islam as a daughter religion of Judaism and Christianity. It is more accurate to call them 'sister religions' that share a common but differentiated reference to Abraham, who is seen by Jews as the father of the nation, by Christians as the depositary of the promise, and by Muslims as the proud destroyer of idols. [. . .]

Both Christianity and Islam are closely related to Judaism in their origins, but soon came into serious tension; consider the Jewish-Christian polemic in the early days of Christianity and Muhammad's polemic against Jews and Christians. These tensions and antagonisms have run through history, but have never erased the consciousness of kinship. They have often led to acute and painful crises, but these have been followed by periods of peaceful coexistence and relations. (Rossano 1983, p. 20)

It is important to emphasize the common reference to Abraham, even if Rossano omits any specification or further deepening of the peculiar characteristics of Abraham's presence and significance for each religion. Despite the common reference, which is undoubtedly a starting point, there are in fact many differences that constitute a terrain to be explored, especially for theological research. It is a matter of considering the particularity of historical-prophetic monotheism since "in the religious panorama of our planet Jews, Christians and Muslims form the great family of worshippers of the one God, creator of the world and of mankind, who has spoken through the prophets, and in the end will be the vindicator and rewarder of good and evil, of justice and injustice committed in history" (Rossano 1983, p. 22). If the reference to Abraham is very important, even in its differentiation, the underlining of the common elements in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic experience is certainly a relevant aspect, especially to highlight the typical dimensions of these three traditions, compared to others that are very different, such as the Dharmic ones. In a complementary way to the emphasis on the common elements, our author immediately recalls the differences that "arise above all from the position held in each of them by the mediator of divine revelation: Moses, Jesus and Muhammad" (Rossano 1983, p. 23). If Abraham is a figure on whom one can meet (Rossano 1983, p. 23), very different is the role and weight of the "mediators" proper to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

These differences in the figures of the Mediators touch, it can be said, every important point of the Jewish, Islamic and Christian worldviews and leads some into the temptation to regard the faith of Muslims and Christians, and sometimes even Jews, as opposites, as if they were radically different and had no real common ground. This problem of differences must be considered carefully, objectively and without hostility. It is enough to mention here that it would be anti-historical and anti-scientific to deny that there is a solid common spiritual

basis for the three religions, but it would be equally naïve not to consider the differences realistically. (Rossano 1983, p. 20)

Almost with a somewhat dialectical rhythm, Rossano oscillates between pointing out differences and recalling similarities. These are well-considered statements, however, lacking depth. They only outline a field of work and research trajectories. Finally, the awareness of preconceptions and assumptions that require both historical and theological revision also returns for all three Abrahamic religions. “The limits and difficulties of dialogue paradoxically derive from their respective implication, that is, from the fact that each religion carries within itself, as a constituent of itself, an image of the other in which the other does not recognize itself, or rather sees itself condemned” (Rossano 1983, pp. 28–29). The elaboration of “an image of the other” is linked to the fundamental question of truth that every religion faces and resolves. While the presence of a hermeneutics of the other is a complex and problematic knot to address, it is undeniable that the recognition of this process of “mutual evaluation” constitutes a further link and implication between Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

4. Word and Love: A Way of Mystical Approach to the Dialogue

What are the characteristics of mysticism in the Christian-Muslim dialogue in Rossano’s contribution? First of all, it would be necessary to specify what “mysticism” means, but this is a difficult undertaking on which the debate is open. Especially at the beginning of the 20th century, there has been a great rediscovery of a mystical approach, both in the Christian sphere and in other spheres—philosophical, psychological, religious—(Coda 2003, pp. 375–460). Among the many publications, it is worth noting the important work *La mistique et les mystiques* (Ravier 1996), which presents no less than ten contributions on as many religious experiences: Christian, Judaic, Evangelical and Anglican, Patristic, Orthodox, Muslim, Taoist, Buddhist and Brahmanism. A volume that Rossano certainly knew.

Starting with the entry for *mystical experience* in a major theology dictionary, it is described as “an attempt to express an immediate consciousness of the presence of the Absolute. Such a definition includes the passive-momentary (touch) and reflective-expressive character of mystical experience, framed within the integral process of living and witnessing”. (Salmann 2002, p. 1029)

Galvagno, in his study on Rossano, also devotes an entire chapter to the “The Mystique of the Dialogue” (Galvagno 1998, pp. 189–230), in which he brings together many dimensions that he places within the mystical dimension. For example, a totally mystical understanding of Christianity.

The root of the Christian life is all about mysticism. There is no Christian life without a mystical foundation, without this basic experience of the Holy Spirit, of faith, of communicated charity . . . it is the Holy Spirit who works charity in us and ensures that what begins with him, through him reaches the Father and is not intersected by allogenic forces. (Rossano 1992, p. 189)

The answer to the question of the mystical approach of the Christian-Muslim dialogue in Rossano must be formulated taking into account several interconnected dimensions, essentially three: the anthropological, the dialogical and the theological.

4.1. Dialogue Is between Persons, Who Are the “Image of God”

First of all, Rossano has always thought and lived with a vision of the human person, more clearly, with an anthropology, which recognizes in each person the image of God. This is how he expresses himself in a passage presenting the reasons for the dialogue.

Let me propose as a motto, as an inscription, at the beginning of this conversation, the statement of Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the Fathers of the Christian mystical thought: “It is the power of the divine image in us that leads us through

all transitory things to the ultimate cause . . . and what is similar in everything is similar because of a certain trace of the divine likeness and call". (Rossano 1976b, p. 66)

The representative of the Secretariat immediately points out that the foundation of the dialogue is a theological one. Instead of quoting a passage from *Ecclesiam suam* or Vatican II, a text belonging to Dionysius the Areopagite that offers the transcendent foundation of what Rossano is doing is quoted, thanks to the "power of the divine image in us". The dense quotation presents three elements: (1) the theological-anthropological foundation of the divine image; (2) the evaluation of similarities as traces of divinity; (3) the tension towards unity that the divine image triggers. The proposed quotation is not only a further confirmation of his knowledge of and preference for Dionysius the Areopagite but also condenses the fundamental aspects underlying a theology of dialogue, beyond any possible instrumental or reductionist misunderstanding. The encounter between people, therefore, always possesses a dimension of additionality, characteristics of mysticism, characterized by inexpressibility and inexhaustibility.

4.2. A Mystical Approach of Word and Love, in the Wake of Ebner

A second mystical dimension in Rossano's work is related to his understanding of *dialogue*, which he draws from both theology and the in-depth study of dialogical thought, especially the contribution of the Austrian philosopher Ferdinand Ebner (Osto 2019, pp. 223–80). Through Ebner (1882–1931), Rossano adopts in his reflections the contribution of dialogical thinking, which has one of its fundamental theoretical nodes in the constitutive relationality of the subject. The *I-You* pair represents the visualization of the constitutive dialogical dimension of the subject (Buber 1993, p. 72). "In the beginning is the relationship" (Buber 1993, p. 72) and "I and You are the spiritual life realities" (Ebner 1998, p. 142).

Rossano takes this anthropological view, which presents dialogue as *intrinsic* and *constitutive* of the human subject, as opposed to and in addition to a conception that might instead consider it extrinsic and instrumental.

The *I* exists in dialogue. The phonological *I*, however, does not only exist in a misunderstanding of itself, but also in a misunderstanding of the other (and especially in a misunderstanding of its "relationship with God". (Ebner 2009, p. 98)

"It is not the existence of the You that is presupposed by the Ego, but vice versa". (Ebner 1998, p. 168)

In these statements [the ones quoted above] the very principle of dialogical philosophy is clearly discernible, namely the fundamental relationship that binds the *I* to the *You*, the impossibility of conceiving of the *I* outside the relationship with the other, up to the absolute, God, encountered not in an exclusive, face-to-face relationship, but—so to say—in the extension of the human relationship that unites man to man. (Sansonetti 1999, p. 381)

The link person-word always recalls the constitutive relationality of communication, where the word is "between" (*Zwischen*), and, therefore, the realistic, factual and concrete aspect, but, at the same time, also the *fullness* of the word and language itself, beyond a logical or purely immanent reduction. "The word is something that occurs between the *I* and the *You*, between the one who 'expresses himself' and 'the one who is to be appealed to' and who 'is appealed'" (Ebner 1998, p. 224). Language, and thus the implementation of dialogue, has a *spiritual* significance.

If we see in the word a means of "communication", then we can ask ourselves what is the ultimate and deepest meaning of all communication. Does it consist only in assigning the other, the "appealed one", to do something, be it a certain external action or just the inner participation in our experiencing, thinking, feeling and wanting? Does this really exhaust the whole meaning of communication, or

should we not go deeper? For the real meaning of the word—insofar as it consists from God in the creation and awakening of the spiritual life of man—consists in the opening of the *I* to the *You*; it is not a question of influencing the outer or inner attitude of the other, but of establishing a relationship with him, a relationship which, of course, does not have to be broken off the next moment. (Ebner 1998, pp. 174–75)

Engaging in dialogue involves an appeal to the sense of responsibility of each interlocutor. The Ebnerian dyad *word and love* is the watermark of an *integral ethics* of dialogue. “The word without love is already a human abuse of the divine gift of word. [. . .] The word actually says that love is eternal” (Ebner 1998, p. 254). The expression “right word” concisely describes the ethical dimension of dialogue, the reality of the word as an ethical commitment and the reality of love as the realization and fulfillment of dialogue.

The conjunction “and” between the “word” and “love” is perhaps the marrow of Ebnerian existence and thought:

The ego is not only a grammatical function and something to do with the use of the language. It actually exists through word and love as a reality of the spiritual life in man. Thus the word and the love go together. [. . .] The *right word* (*Das rechte Wort*) is always the one expressing love and having in itself the power to break down Chinese walls. Every human misfortune depends on the fact that men are seldom able to pronounce the right word. If they were capable, they would have spared the misfortune and pains of wars. There is no human suffering that could not be avoided by the right word, and there is no genuine consolation in the various misfortunes of this life except that which comes from the right word. The word spoken without love is already a human abuse of the divine gift of word. In such an abuse, the word contradicts its own authentic meaning and becomes spiritually extinct. It is lost in temporality. On the other hand, the word that says love is eternal. (Ebner 1998, p. 254)

The *right word* comes from love for the word itself and rises as a word of love, within a relationship, coming from the journey, from the encounter between *I* and *You*. The first fragment of the diary from 1916/1917, in fact, says: “This is man’s first and last problem, the alpha and omega of his spiritual life: in the face of the multiple shattering of his life, to be able to arrive by “existing” through the right relationship” (Ebner 1983, p. 43).

The integral anthropology of dialogue holds the possibility of transcendence, the openness to a gift and the incompleteness of the immanence of dialogue. Every person, precisely because he or she “has the word”, is open to the possibility of “receiving an appeal”. Ebner states that “the *I* and the *You* are the spiritual realities of life” (Ebner 1998, p. 142). Rossano has always cherished the reality of *homo religiosus* as the ground on which dialogue is possible. In Ebnerian terms, transcendental religiosity is pneumatology. The *spirit* in man is that irreducible, unconditioned, inexhaustible dimension that constitutes his *possibility of relationship* (*I-You*), of any relationship, that with another person, that with the divine *You* (Dell’Eva 1999).

The soil in which Ebner’s thought germinates and grows is fundamentally a meditation on the Prologue of the Gospel of John (*Jn* 1:1–14). It is an entirely Christological dialogical thought and certainly this peculiarity of Ebner, compared to other authors, was decisive for Rossano.

The ultimate foundation of all things and events—which is a spiritual foundation—is not the truth of the Word that is manifested through the truth of being, but just the opposite: the truth of being is manifested through the truth of the Word. For in the spirituality of its origin, the Word is the source of all truth and all being: everything was created through the Word, and without the Word nothing that exists was made; in it was life, and life was the light of men. (*Jn* 1:3, 4). (Ebner 1998, p. 367)

A synthetic concept, which can summarize the various Ebnerian contributions and their assumption in Rossano, is that of *theandricity*. In Ebnerian terms, this dimension can be expressed by the reciprocity existing between “having the word” (dialogue), “being appealed to” (listener) and “the possibility of appealing” (doer). “The word mediates spiritually between man and man, but ultimately between him and God, between him and the spiritual foundation of his existence” (Ebner 1998, pp. 187–88). “God created man through the word, and man’s true humanity is still created by the word of God, until the end of the world” (Ebner 1998, p. 320).

The constant focus on *homo religiosus*, as a transcendental possibility of dialogue, can be expressed in Ebnerian terms with the famous definition of man as *hearer of the word* (*Hörer des Wortes*). Fully in tune with Rahner’s theological proposal, Rossano often takes up this theological interpretation of the possibility of dialogue. “The non-Christian can theoretically be defined, from an anthropological point of view, [. . .] a “*hearer of the word*” (Ebner), that is, a man elevated and existentially enlightened by God . . . ” (Rossano 1978, p. 88).

“God created man by the very fact of speaking to him. [. . .] That God created man means nothing else than that God spoke to him. In creating man He said to him: I am and through me you also are” (Ebner 1998, p. 156). Dialogue, therefore, is possible and continues in the unfolding of creation in time.

I believe that one’s maturity and serenity depend on the way in which he knows how to establish the *right relationship* with the realities that surround him. [. . .] A Christian easily discovers in Jesus, as He appears in the Gospels, the great model of the right relationship, towards oneself, towards nature, towards men, towards women (the right relationship towards women, which is not given sufficient attention), and the right relationship towards God, the beginning and the end of everything that exists. Herein lies the secret of human life. (Rossano 1982b, p. 107)

The depth of these considerations on dialogue, on the relationship between word and person, and the relationship between word and love, constitutes perhaps Rossano’s most original contribution to a mystical approach to dialogue.

Rossano and Ebner work in the so-called continental tradition of thought. Indeed, we must understand the main concepts of “love” and “word” by considering three particular cultural backgrounds. The one linked to the Bible, where the concept of “word” is very particular and coincides with “action”. Secondly, the dialogic thinking that developed at the beginning of the 20th century and of which Ebner is one of the protagonists. Finally, the philosophy of language (Wittgenstein), which is focused on logic and words. As regards the concept of “love”, it must be understood in particular starting from the conception of the Bible and Christianity.

4.3. Recognizing the Surplus of God’s Presence

In his encounters with people of other religions and in his theological reflection on religions, Rossano is aware of the *mystical dimension* of every experience. In particular, the text of NA 2, which uses the metaphor of light, is an important gift in this regard.

In fact, it is appropriate to link the *eschatological* dimension, which encompasses the fullness and completion of the Word as Light (the final resurrection) holds the excess of the light of the Word, with the *mystical* dimension, which can be considered one of the historically detectable peaks of every religious experience. Our theologian also briefly mentions this aspect (Rossano 1968, pp. 212–13). The mystical dimension of every religious experience highlights its overflowing and invites the apophatic dimension proper to theology. If the awareness of eschatological fullness recalls an open historical-temporal horizon and thus situates historical configurations in their limitedness, the mystical dimension already literally preserves the inexhaustibility of mystery and thus any attempt to dominate or codify experience. We are called to discern, to trace the rays of the Word, but we must also be aware that it is impossible to grasp the whole of experience, even religious experience. In

this sense, the mystical dimension remains a reserve and a limit against possible reductions of religious experience, e.g., of a rationalistic kind (only that which is logically derivable from a common principle, for example, can be called true), of an ethical kind (only that which is a moral indication is valid) or of an aesthetic kind (only that which perceptible by the human senses is valuable).

I would like to refer to the theme of *mystical interiority*, the indwelling of God, of Christ and of the Spirit in the Christian, and that of the body, the temple of God. The Epistles to the Corinthians, especially the first one, possess the most famous texts in this regard and mark the *first* decisive affirmation of this doctrine in the history of the Church. It is very likely to discern here an influence, or at least a strong stimulus from environmental mysticism. Suffice it to mention, to give an example, the *Sentences* of the Pythagorean Sextus, whose existence is close to that of Paul. (Rossano 1971, p. 212)

To speak of a *spirituality* of dialogue means first of all understanding this process within the horizon of the Spirit, since the Spirit is in fact the great promoter and nourisher of ecclesial action. Dimensions such as *prayer* and *interiority* are constitutive of the dialogical event cherished within the consciousness of a person, something real with significant, even if difficult, empirical access, but undoubtedly real and significant. Rossano illustrates, in fact, a co-presence of *different levels* of dialogue, recalling how personal conscience is the most decisive place. In the biblical lexicon, we find the word *heart* to indicate the laboratory of decisions and the most intimate experience of God.

If prayer and interiority are inner dimensions of the spirituality of dialogue, *witnessing* and *agape* delineate its form and content. Dialogue is a form of witness of the Gospel and its purpose is to communicate the love of Christ. Rossano reiterates how charity is the supreme criterion for evaluating an experience and the goal of all action, hence also of dialogue. We conclude these short summary notes with one of the most beautiful quotes on this theme, where Rossano states that:

The line separating redemption and non-redemption, the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, is not the dividing line between us and our non-Christian interlocutors. Nor is it the borderline between Christian and non-Christian societies: the dividing line runs through the heart of every man, of every Christian. (Rossano 1973, p. 400)

Here is an attestation of the *mystical dimension* of the Rossano dialogue.

4.4. Interiority and Prayer

Mysticism is linked to interiority and prayer; and Rossano, as already mentioned, used to pray daily for Muslims. Here is a text taken from a page of the *unpublished Diary*, dated 9 February 1985, quoted by Galvagno in his research.

Since man carries a spark of the spirit within him, an echo of the absolute, a core that cannot be reduced to empirical, scientifically analyzable components, it is spontaneous for him to turn towards and enter into relationship with the eternal spirit that exists before him: Prayer is the expression of this otherness which also characterizes man according to the spiritual order, and with it he turns to his eternal *You*, opening his own existence to Him. He who for the sake of the Kingdom of God renounces the exercise of his own bodily otherness, must develop his spiritual otherness, the prayer. (Galvagno 1998, p. 197)

5. Conclusions

Rossano's mystical approach to dialogue offers us some important dimensions. First, the intertwining of experience, service and reflection is characteristic of every form of dialogue. Secondly, with regard to interreligious dialogue, Rossano testifies the concreteness, the need for personal encounter, patience and a spirit of service. The mysticism of interreligious dialogue is linked to the anthropological dimension of the dignity of persons

who are “in the image of God”, to the spiritual dimension of language where word and love constitute the experience and the form of it, and, finally, interiority and prayer are the dimensions and practice that guard and nourish this mystical dimension.

For the Islamic-Christian dialogue, what emerges is: the still early state, after centuries of conflict and controversy, a great differentiation and the need for a purification of memory. The reference to Abraham is an important particularity and the task of spiritual fidelity to this shared bond between Jews, Christians and Muslims.

In conclusion, Rossano’s mystical dimension of the Islamic-Christian dialogue finds its highest expression in his personal prayer for Muslims, as we have mentioned. Finally, the words of a witness have significant weight.

Monsignor Rossano has never accepted a “dialogue of compromise” that would settle for the “lowest common denominator” in matters of faith or worship: the real dialogue is a “peaks” in the mystical approach to God. (Borrmans 1992a, p. 176)

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