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# From *Inter-Religious* Dialogue to *Intra-Religious* Dialogue: An Original Perspective of André Scrima's Thought

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**Abstract:** André Scrima was confronted from the very beginning with the multifaceted reality of the religious phenomenon. To help us understand this reality, his theological approach can be compared to that of the reverse perspective in Byzantine art: the further away an object is, the larger it becomes, and the closer it is, the smaller it becomes. From this perspective, the usual landmarks of knowledge are reversed, since it is the viewer who decides on the validity and truth of knowledge, and not the objective reality that would force adherence without any right to object. In theological terms, we could say that the ultimate significance of religious pluralism is not its outward manifestation nor the objectivity of its material data. In the final analysis, the person of faith brings their own experience into play as they decide on the truth of religions in general. The vanishing line no longer lies in the phenomenal exteriority of data but within each one. We will call this perspective *intra-religious* dialogue because, in addition to starting from the inner dimension of the experience of faith, it allows each of these experiences to reflect the "seeds of truth" that the Spirit scatters where it wills.

**Keywords:** *intra-religious* dialogue; pluralism; universality; interiority; zenithal orientation; itinerancy



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## 1. Introduction

For André Scrima, the reality of religious pluralism challenges us to elaborate a new "theological episteme" (Scrima 2004, p. 89). The starting point of this episteme is the place of our interiority. For André Scrima, the interiority of a religion is the "theological place" of a "transcending without rejection" (Scrima 2004, p. 90). The resources for transcendence are not to be sought outside. They are not even to be created from completely new foundations, but on the contrary, they are to be found within one's own religion. This means that any religion must be capable of a certain transcendence without renunciation.

André Scrima discovered from within his Orthodox Christianity the universal dimension of faith which embraces everything and excludes no-one. Can religion rise to such a level of consciousness? "If there is any real sense in the 'meeting of religions', it is certainly not to elaborate a discourse about God, but to discover ourselves mutually and together in Him" (Scrima 2004, p. 94). Let us emphasize here the importance of the perspective adopted: from God and not necessarily from the historical condition of a religion. At the same time, to discover ourselves together means to situate ourselves together under the gaze of God, to recognise the spiritual validity of the other, and to recognise the part of interiority that the other carries. For this reason, we believe that another term is needed to designate this type of encounter, a term we have chosen to call *intra-religious* dialogue.

Although we have become accustomed to labelling the phenomenon of encounter between religions as *inter-religious* dialogue, we might wonder whether there is room in this expression for an additional dimension that we would call *intra-religious* dialogue. In formulating such a hypothesis, our study will not attempt to address anything other than the way in which interreligious dialogue can give rise to a much more interior dimension of the encounter between religions, a dimension which, we believe, cannot be approached by simply placing two already defined religions in contact with each other, but rather by

discovering the common ground on which these religions are founded. In other words, we will try to understand whether the dialogue between religions perceived so far as a simple meeting between two opposing blocks (as in the case of bilateral meetings between two states) is still good enough for the in-depth encounter that such a dialogue should have in its sights.

The difficulty with such a perspective probably lies in defining what we really mean by an in-depth dialogue, a notion that can only aim to advance towards the *beyond* of what is presented to us for the time being in its visible form. This *beyond* should not correspond at all to the kind of progress that simply turns its back on the past but rather to a *descent*, a return to the source, where, for the time being, we can only assume, religions would be *at home*.

A genuine dialogue between religions can only be a dialogue in which the simple encounter is transformed into a genuine communion, i.e., into that level of reality in which religions, while preserving their own identity, constitute a single body, a single manifestation of a reality that transcends them. Having arrived at this level, let us accept that the terms themselves are in danger of falling apart; the reality that is being circumscribed is itself beyond words and the object of caution: God? (but which one exactly?), the sacred, the spiritual dimension, ultimate reality, the One, the Same? Or perhaps a little of each? Are these the notions that should underlie intra-religious dialogue? Certainly, in our concern to define what a deep encounter between religions means, such issues cannot be ignored. That they cannot yet be defined in a sufficiently clear way is not in itself a problem because it is precisely this dimension of intra-religious dialogue that seeks not to say the same thing but to express the "Same" in many different ways.

Therefore, intra-religious dialogue is not at all a speculative enterprise but a necessity arising from the historical condition of religions themselves: the fact that the objective condition of religions inevitably obliges us to question what it means that each proclaims itself to be the holder of the truth, and at the same time that this truth is professed in multiple and even divergent ways. It is therefore easy to see that we are faced with a contradiction that we do not yet know how to face. The hypothesis we wish to put forward in this article is that by starting from the inner dimension of intra-religious dialogue we will be better able to account for both the presence of truth in the bosom of monotheistic religions and the contents of its expression in multiple, even contradictory, ways.

By intra-religious dialogue we do not mean a simple dialogue between religions but their mutual fertilisation through dialogue. This kind of dialogue is not meant to teach us new things about each other's religion, but to transform us into becoming true followers of our own religion. To speak of intra-religious dialogue, therefore, is to start not from the dialogue between religions but from the way in which each religion dialogues with what constitutes its fundamental nature. In this sense, intra-religious dialogue will not just be an additional stage in inter-religious dialogue but its essential premise, the possibility offered to any truly authentic dialogue.

## 2. On the Origins of This New Term

One of the theologians who reflected on the notion of intra-religious dialogue was Raimon Panikkar in his book entitled *The intra-religious dialogue* (Panikkar 1999). Although Panikkar does not offer a precise definition of intra-religious dialogue, his understanding of it can be gleaned from the following statement:

> "The intra-religious dialogue is itself a religious act—an act that neither unifies nor stifles but re-links us (in all directions). It takes place in the core of our being in our quest for salvific truth—in whatever sense we may understand these too-loaded words. We engage in such a dialogue not only looking above, toward a transcendent reality, or behind, toward an original tradition, but also horizontally, toward the world of other people who may believe they have found other paths leading to the realization of human destiny" (Panikkar 1999, p. XVII).

Panikkar in fact moves the objective and institutional dimension of dialogue to the inner and personal sphere of each individual believer, in the sense that "to dialogue" means first of all to dialogue with oneself. This has nothing to do with a solitary exercise but with a process through which the believer comes to their own awareness of their faith, not in isolation but by constantly confronting it with their own questions and those of others. For Raimon Panikkar, intra-religious dialogue even implies a shift from what he calls "dialectical dialogues" (doctrinal) to "erotic dialogues" or emotional dialogues (Panikkar 1999, p. XV). Although Panikkar uses language in which we might see a superficial opposition between reason and feeling, between theoretical and affective knowledge, his distinction is aimed at something entirely different. The "erotic" dimension is merely a term to emphasize the existential dimension of this dialogue, a dialogue that engages the totality of the levels of being right down to their most unsuspected depths. Panikkar expands on this idea:

> "The religious encounter must deal with the historical dimension, non stop with it. It is not an encounter of historians, even less of archaeologists, but it is a living dialogue, a place for creative thinking and imaginative new ways that do not break with the past but continue and extend it" (Panikkar 1999, p. 63).

Intra-religious dialogue can be nothing other than a dialogue between people who have "assimilated" or rather "allowed themselves to be assimilated" by the mysterious reality that they themselves will later confront in an honest and sincere dialogue with the "other". In the absence of such deep "assimilation", dialogue is only protocol and pedantry. Consequently, if we are allowed to make an initial distinction between inter-religious dialogue and intra-religious dialogue, it can be said that this distinction is first and foremost at the level of the experience of faith in its inner dimension. With the expression "intra-religious dialogue", what we are really interested in is taking into account the interior and non-institutional dimension that this dialogue allows. In this respect, intra-religious dialogue has had its own pioneers, people who experienced encounters with other religious at a spiritual level, even if this meant sometimes finding themselves at odds with the discourse of official theology. So, alongside Raimon Panikkar, we can mention other key figures of the last century, such as the Islamologist Louis Massignon, Henri Le Saux and Jules Monchanin for the dialogue with Hinduism but also Charles de Foucauld and the monks of Tibhirine, who experienced a profound and original form of dialogue with Islam through the practice of hospitality. In them and in many others, the experience of intra-religious dialogue is present, whether the expression is used as such or not, because, above all, what we are seeking to understand is the unique experience that is created by this type of dialogue. Very often, as in the case of Louis Massignon, it is of the order of a shared hospitality, where the host is as much the one who offers hospitality as the one who receives it: "It is only to the extent that we grant hospitality to the other (instead of colonising him), to the extent that we share with him the same work, the same bread, that we become aware of the Truth that unites us socially. Truth can only be found by practising hospitality" (Massignon 1963, p. 608).

The fact that Panikkar insists so much on the "embodied" aspect of the dialogue raises a methodological problem concerning the very nature of theology, which André Scrima addresses in turn in the form of a necessary distinction between "the nature of theology" and "the nature of theological statements" (Scrima 1964). In this distinction lies the possibility for theology to reconnect with "theological realities" (Scrima 1964), in other words, the possibility for it to practise the "living dialogue" advocated by Panikkar. We can say that, in this vision of things, there is, in fact, *a theology beyond theology* that is still waiting to be written (nothing is more difficult than writing about new realities without immediately adjusting them to the structure of already existing categories. "Theological reality" therefore continues to be interpreted on the basis of the same established categories that do not have the courage to question what exactly the apophatic dimension of truth itself is and whether theology is in fact the discipline that bears its name). On the contrary, Panikkar will say that "The effort of religious understanding is constitutively unfinished,

in-finite; it will continue as long as necessary because it is itself the manifestation of our contingency" (Panikkar 1999, p. 114). Therefore, if theological reflection is a continuous and practically endless act, what does this mean with regard to the truth content of already established notions? This is why it is important to understand the perspective from which we will speak of intra-religious dialogue in this study: it is a dialogue between persons starting from that dimension of existence which defines them in a fundamental way.

Our aim is to understand this perspective by starting from the theology of Father Scrima, a theology that reflects a constant concern to dialogue in a profound way with the other person, with their own religion, with the vitally important questions that any person of good will asks. This investigation of the inner dimensions of dialogue is necessary because it not only reveals a more authentic dimension of dialogue but also enables us to know the basis of André Scrima's commitment to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, both theologically and institutionally.

For André Scrima, the aim of intra-religious dialogue is to get to know the other person by starting from one's own interiority. One discovers the other as they are constituted in their own being and in their own convictions. It is a knowing that takes place "from within, where the believer is bound to go sooner or later, from within where our questions, perplexities, anxieties and perhaps the reasons for renewed hope also come, at the level of the quasi-daily event" (Scrima 2004, p. 161). The source of all authentic questioning can only come from this inward dimension of one's faith. Intra-religious dialogue is not an exchange of responses but an acceptance of the presence of the other, a recognition of a "phenomenal" presence.

We know only too well that the dialogue with the disciples at Emmaus could only become a genuine dialogue when the two disciples were able *to recognize* the implausible nature of the presence of the Risen One. Receiving the presence of the other, their disconcerting presence, is therefore the first step towards a truly authentic dialogue. When Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras met for the first time in Jerusalem on 5–6 January 1964, André Scrima interprets the meaning of their meeting from this perspective of intra-religious dialogue: "Indeed (. . . ) it was not they who mattered in the first place: it was the unpredictability of God's plan that became reality through them and by them" (Scrima 1964). This "unpredictability" of God is in fact the transcendent dimension of the dialogue, in the sense that it implies a step back from verbal formalisms and a step forward to a "beyond" towards which the dialogue's interlocutors must move. "The unforeseeable" never depends on the ability of the interlocutors to communicate well or on the diplomatic efforts made in this respect but is manifested as an occurrence, as an unforeseeable reality in the everyday life of those who know how to be open to it. The unpredictability of God is, we could say, a form of *pneumatology in action*, i.e., a form of manifestation of His presence emanating from the core of interiority in which the essence of the respective religions is maintained.

It is from such a perspective that we will seek to demonstrate the argument that André Scrima loved Islam from his position as a genuine Christian. Dialogue between religions must therefore not only aim at a form of *pax romana* but also encourage an irrepressible search for the mystery present in the self and in the other. In the case of André Scrima, what we need to understand is how his encounter with Islam permeates his own experience of faith, accompanies it, challenges it, and even "contradicts" it. Only in this way can we say that intra-religious dialogue is also a form of introspection, because through dialogue, the interlocutors allow themselves to be questioned about their own beliefs, their faith is called upon to explain the meaning of their mutual existence, to account for what does not fit into their own systems of representation.

Intra-religious dialogue is, therefore, also a dialogue with what can shake me in my own religious convictions. What would be the purpose of dialogue if there were not at the beginning this form of perplexity, an inability to arrive at a coherent explanation of the existence of such different religions? Dialogue between religions must also confront such a form of "existential" distress, which will lead people to probe more deeply and with greater

earnestness what it means to confront someone who does not share their own beliefs. For this reason, intra-religious dialogue is also a dialogue with oneself, an encounter through which the person of faith actually questions their own adherence to the truth. It is in this vein, we believe, that Panikkar's following statement about his own spiritual itinerancy is situated: "I 'left' as a Christian, I 'found' myself a Hindu, and I 'return' a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian" (Panikkar 1999, p. 42). At this level of dialogue, we can say that there are no rules, only the freedom of a questioning born of the perplexity of an encounter. Additionally, in the same way, Henri Le Saux will say: "I have now tasted too much advaita to be able to find the 'Gregorian' peace of a Christian monk. I once tasted too much of this 'Gregorian' peace not to be distressed within my advaita" (Le Saux 1986, p. 99).

## 3. Jerusalem as the City of the Encounter of the Three Monotheisms under the Same Axis of Transcendence

To illustrate the notion of intra-religious dialogue in André Scrima's thought, one of the most eloquent symbols to which one can appeal is the city of Jerusalem. More than just a city, Jerusalem represents in André Scrima's thought a special type of reflection for his vision of intra-religious dialogue. This privileged position is primarily derived from Jerusalem's unique status as a city at the crossroads of shared questions about the notion of the transcendent. However, it is precisely from such a unique position that the paradoxical and tragic status of Jerusalem is derived. It is a city claimed by all three monotheisms, but in reality, belongs to none of them. It belongs only to those whose orientation is towards the same transcendent, i.e., to everyone and no one.

André Scrima often speaks of "the place Jerusalem occupies in the three monotheistic traditions" (Scrima 2004, p. 29). We must therefore ask ourselves what exactly is meant in this context by the topographical notion of "place". On what basis can Jerusalem claim such a privilege? One possible answer would be the following: Jerusalem is "place" because it "gives" and "offers" a "place" to the divine. Jerusalem is a "holy city" insofar as it remains open to the coming of the divine. Additionally, it is the coming of the divine that makes it "habitable", that is, the "place" of divine hospitality. Herein lies the whole difference between the privileged "place" of Jerusalem and the indiscriminate location of the cities of the world, just as the opposition between Jerusalem below (an ordinary city like all the others) and Jerusalem above (the city of those who claim the same transcendent) will be affirmed. Could it be a coincidence that in the subtitle of the article appears this clarification: "Composition of 'place'"? Of what can Jerusalem be "composed" if not of the sacred present in it, of its essential sacredness and its capacity to give orientation to the person of faith? For the three monotheisms, therefore, Jerusalem manifests itself as a project for their essential structure and definition. It is Jerusalem that ultimately "designs" them, in the sense that it configures them for the reception of the transcendent dimension. "Composition" does not only mean solid structure but also that which is composed of man's uninterrupted interaction with the divine, from which is derived, among other things, the notion of a "habitable" city, i.e., a city that provides the space necessary for such interaction.

Nevertheless, since the aspect of "composition" of place must be understood in the sense of project and projection (Jerusalem from above is constantly being built), another aspect that will be closely associated with it is that of *expectation*, since any project gives rise to a state of *expectation* regarding its fulfilment. *Waiting* is the attitude that the person of faith adopts with regard to how Jerusalem should be designed. For André Scrima, the spectrum of expression of this expectation ranges from "sorrow" to "jubilation" (Scrima 2004, p. 29), and it is in this oscillation that the entire destiny of Jerusalem has been decided from its foundation to the present day (the periodic clashes between Muslims and Jews on the Temple esplanade, beyond their political and ideological significance, should not be seen from this perspective of unmet expectations?). "The "expectation" that Jerusalem arouses in the heart of the three monotheisms has served, one after the other, either as a "guiding utopia to perpetuate the anamnesis of a sacred age" (Scrima 2004, p. 29) or as an inner disposition to "decipher the coming of an 'other' world" (Scrima 2004,

p. 29). At the opposite pole, that of disappointment, Jerusalem served as a model "to exacerbate the violence of the ages" (Scrima 2004, p. 29). It is clear, therefore, that amidst all the expectations and disappointments that have accompanied Jerusalem's destiny, the holy city reflects nothing other than the fundamental destiny and orientation of the three monotheisms.

Jerusalem, similarly to a sacred text, represents for André Scrima the religious memory of an experience of faith. For this reason, "Jerusalem gives a totally different *sign* as if from somewhere else on its journey through the history of nations and the consciousness of the three religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism) that claim it" (Scrima 2004, p. 30). This "somewhere else" is in fact its zenith dimension. Only those who know how to decipher Jerusalem's destiny from the perspective of its zenithal orientation will be able to situate themselves critically in relation to the contingent aspect of their own religion. At the risk of repeating ourselves, such attitudes can only stem from the ability to "inhabit" Jerusalem, and by extension, from the ability to fundamentally "inhabit" its religious affiliation.

Jerusalem as a city of the world is of no importance in these reflections; what matters is to decipher, with André Scrima, one of the fundamental dimensions of intra-religious dialogue, starting from the spiritual and existential significance of the auroral Jerusalem. This "intra-" of dialogue is only possible if we first accept that we are moving under the same horizon of reference, the prefix "intra-" being nothing other than the possibility of a dialogue whose starting point is the unconditional dimension of the experience of faith. Since we are talking about the three monotheisms, the aim is not to determine together, through dialogue, the unconditional aspects of each one's faith in order to see whether they are identical and then reach an agreement but to dialogue from the unconditional dimensions of each one's faith. André Scrima had a few formulas for this kind of statement: to discover "not 'the same thing', but the Same differently: therein lies the whole noetic and existential difference" (Scrima 2004, p. 101) and "to say the same thing differently is not to say exactly the same thing" (Scrima 2008, p. 249). It is therefore false to say that the aim of dialogue is to end up saying "the same thing" but to discover the "Same" in what we are, by virtue of how we define ourselves. In André Scrima's terms, our understanding must be "vectorialised" (Scrima 2004, p. 107), since intra-religious dialogue is not so much a speculative interrogation as an "insistent introvision, in Heidegger's sense. Not the shift from right to left, in the name of ecumenism, but the penetration of such a brutal statement—negative or positive—and probing it beyond its first appearances" (Scrima 2004, pp. 108–9).

Jerusalem's pre-eminence does not come from the fact that the three monotheisms recognize it as important in their own "organizational structure". If this were so, its importance would depend on the recognition and attention given to it by the three monotheisms. The fact that the Dalai Lama has been to Jerusalem[1] has nothing to do with the possible prestige of the city that the Tibetan leader's visit would simply confirm. The recognition of Jerusalem as the legitimate capital of Israel by some states cannot determine the right of a state to unilaterally and exclusively dispose of the existence of a city that all three monotheisms claim in the name of the unconditional reality with which Jerusalem is usually associated.

For André Scrima, Jerusalem belongs to the unconditional dimensions of faith because it was born "in the original space of revelation to which the spiritual experience of the three religions is linked" (Scrima 2004, p. 31). The religious importance of Jerusalem can only be justified from this perspective, since it is not the human city itself that is the centre of the three monotheisms but the "original space" that gave birth to Jerusalem and religious experience as such. For this reason, Jerusalem exists as a city only insofar as it remains in this space, which André Scrima also refers to by other terms such as "theophanic place" or "gateway to heaven" (Scrima 2004, p. 32).

Is today's Jerusalem still the citadel of such a manifestation of the divine? The answer to this question will necessarily invoke the conflicting realms of a Jerusalem above and a Jerusalem below. This is why André Scrima will say that Jerusalem, in its essential function,

is a city "to be discovered rather than demonstrated" (Scrima 2004, p. 33). This statement, we believe, is a clear enough answer to the usefulness of claiming a Jerusalem below in the name of a pseudo-relationship to the existence of Jerusalem above. From this point of view, the unilateral claim to Jerusalem by one of the monotheisms proves absolutely nothing (such as the superiority of one religion over another). Additionally, if we are to talk about a possible conquest of Jerusalem, then what each of the three monotheisms should conquer is not the city itself (the one made of brick walls) but the "sacred space" from which each reveals itself as belonging to the same pole of transcendence.

The "discovery" of Jerusalem is therefore inseparable from a reflection on the essential foundations of the three monotheisms. Because Jerusalem "was born (...) at the same time as revelation itself" (Scrima 2004, p. 33), its significance is therefore not "historic" but "historical": Jerusalem is the very place where revelation takes place. This is the main reason why Jerusalem can be considered as the starting point for an in-depth dialogue. That the significance of Jerusalem cannot be understood from the banal meaning of a certain topography can also be seen from André Scrima's description of the city as a "place of truth" (Scrima 2004, p. 33), an expression which we must understand to mean that Jerusalem *reveals*, is open to the manifestation of the transcendent, and at the same time reveals one of the fundamental characteristics of faith, which is *itinerancy*: to believe is to move in the direction of "the same expectation" (Scrima 2004, p. 34).

The symbolic geography of Jerusalem is intended to give the believer the orientation, the zenithal meaning of their faith, that is to say, those features which place them in the presence of "the same expectation". The importance of Jerusalem in Islam must therefore be understood on the basis of its function of giving orientation and not on the basis of all sorts of political or historical explanations which only create confusion. The fate of Jerusalem in the absence of this ability to give direction should be of no more concern to us than the fate of any other city. Jerusalem, in its significance as destination, is the place of witness to the uniqueness and universality of the three monotheisms. Therefore, because the uniqueness and universality of the three monotheisms are related to their zenithal orientation, it should go without saying that it is not the religions as realities, for example historical or sociological, that are unique, but the transcendent that dwells in them and from which these religions draw or "find their origin", their uniqueness and universality. Hence, we have the fact that only Jerusalem is able to give the measure (the right measure) of the notions of uniqueness and universality without this understanding relativising or, on the contrary, favouring the affirmation of one religion to the detriment of another.

## 4. Abraham, the *Hanif*

If Jerusalem constitutes an important element for the foundation of an intra-religious dialogue because of the central position it occupies in the structure of the three monotheisms, another element that is added to this dialogue is the figure of Abraham, as the character through whom the three monotheisms "commune in this encounter" (Scrima 2004, p. 35). Abraham is the model of the person of faith who overcomes obstacles not from their intra-mundane perspective but from that of the *One who calls*. This overcoming takes place through itinerancy. The solution to the difficulties inherent in any religion in relation to another can only be found in the visible gesture of itinerancy, which in this case corresponds to the very phenomenon of encounter. The solution is not to be found in any particular place (it is not written down in advance) but is born gradually as the itinerancy is practised.

Abraham's faith is the expression of an itinerancy which must be understood, in the present context, as the absence of any earthly ties, including that of his own son Isaac. The space of his faith stretches between the two fundamental words of the call: "Leave" (Gen 12:1) and "Here, I am" (Gen 22:1) (Scrima 2004, p. 35). Paradoxically, faith is built not from the storage of firm answers but from the unrestrained search for the answer, which in fact signifies the refusal of any definitive answer. A human is only able to say "Here, I am" when they are not in fact in possession of any truly clear and definitive answer. However, is not this also faith? Faith asserts itself between the two boundaries that are God's call

and humanity's answer. On the quality of the response will depend the actual size of the horizon of faith, the "timid" response being, on the contrary, the equivalent of a closed faith that prefers the security of its own affirmations to a reckless adventure. Faith, for André Scrima, is itinerancy.

Taking this perspective as a starting point, Scrima will say that the real identity of Islam (or, if we prefer, its phenomenal understanding) must be seen from the kind of spatiality that the two limits of call and response inaugurate. In other words, Islam is itself another type of sacred spatiality aroused by the divine call and human response. Generally speaking, we can thus say that every religion is a form of faith-spatiality. From this we can deduce how misguided is the approach that seeks to affirm exclusively the truth of a religion when in fact what we should be concerned with is the meaning of these different spatialities that faith gives rise to. We might also ask what the existence of present and future spatialities means.

When we refer to the universality of Abraham, what we have to bear in mind are in fact the universal characteristics of faith (call and response), they are also the numerous spatialities that faith gives rise to, or, to use Scrima's terms, they are the endless itineraries of faith where what matters is neither the favouring of one path over another, nor the irrational claim to the existence of a single path, but the inauguration of a path as the concrete realisation of a call from above. The divine is not something uniform but rhizomatic. This is why the figure of Abraham can enable us to understand that the problem of interreligious dialogue must not be linked to the existence of multiple paths but to the way in which, starting from a call and a response, a new itinerancy of faith is inaugurated. This is also God's expectation when He commands Abraham to leave his country and his family in order to begin a new itinerancy. The fact that Islam claims this Abrahamic universality means, for Scrima, that Islam is simply actualizing in the form of a new itinerancy the two constitutive dimensions of faith: call and response.

The notion of truth is intimately related to the existence of the path itself and not a matter of the number of paths. As Kierkegaard says: "It is not the truth which is the truth, but the way which is the truth" (Kierkegaard 2002, p. 58). From the moment they are on the path, a human is already in the truth of their faith, because truth is a matter of response (humanity's response to God's call) and not of a specific response. We argue over the number of possible paths without knowing what the path is. For André Scrima, Islam is one of the many paths of truth, one of the possible spaces that humanity's response to the call of the transcendent inaugurates. For André Scrima, Islam is the religion of the manifestation of a space, it is "the space that the tradition of Islam opens up to receive the Abrahamic universality" (Scrima 2004, p. 36).

This characterisation of Islam by Scrima should convince us once and for all of the notion of truth in the three monotheisms and incidentally rid us of the spectre of the chronological argument that Islam's authenticity is diminished by its late appearance on the stage of history. Therefore, from the moment it claims the prophetic spirit, Islam is as inaugural, as auroral, as the religions that preceded it on the chronological scale (Judaism and Christianity). Islam, says André Scrima, "effectively amounts to a reassumption, but a reassumption in the order of revelation, starting precisely from the 'place where Abraham is called'" (Scrima 2004, p. 37).

In other words, the "place" from which the Abrahamic universality is spoken is, as the term allows us to understand, a topical and not chronological location. There is a timeless dimension to the "place" which allows it to occur with the same intensity under all horizons and in all epochs. This is why, for André Scrima, "the original places of our faith (…) are not chronological but ontological and spiritual" (Scrima 2004, p. 96). This is what we can call, in other words, the principle of contemporaneity in faith. "Place" is a spatialisation of faith on which time has no bearing. God's "call" comes in a "space" (the *Ur* of the Chaldees and then the Land of Canaan) and not in a certain irreversible "epoch" (which only moves away and alienates itself from us until it itself falls into the mist of mythological, legendary time). From the perspective of faith, one is always contemporary with the actual event of

one's faith because it is of the order of the inauguration of a spatiality. Additionally, when chronological time is placed at the service of the spatial nature of faith, it becomes "kairos".

From this perspective, the Christian is always contemporary with events such as the Incarnation or the Resurrection of the Lord, because they are events of the spatial nature of faith and, by virtue of this characteristic, cannot be affected by the wear and tear of time. The Resurrection, which the Christian celebrates year after year, is equivalent in intensity to the same event which occurred in history two thousand years ago. However, this fact cannot be understood by those who endlessly search for historical "proofs", thus accrediting their faith according to the verdict of positivist sciences. Of course, in saying this, we are not trying to say that faith should be a completely ahistorical reality, because the aim is not to set aside the chronological argument, but simply to try to reflect on the universality of faith by starting from its "local" aspect, which, not by chance, remains paramount in the structure of Eastern ecclesiology.

The "place" from which Abraham is named is the same "place" from which the identity of Christianity and Islam will later be named. What does it mean, then, for the person of faith to "live" in such a place from which they will determine their own living or existence? Although it is the place that gives identity, it should not be understood in the sense of a standardising, categorical, or denominational identity. Abraham's identity is that of a righteous believer, or *hanif*, as André Scrima puts it, taking up here the qualifier with which Islam designates him in the Quran (3:67): "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was *hanif*" (Scrima 2004, p. 37). The "upright believer" is not a person of a particular faith, but the model of the universal believer, a certain style of keeping faith, which, in this case, corresponds to a certain posture of orientation. This is why, in line with this characteristic, André Scrima concludes, on the basis of the same indications provided by the Quran, that Abraham "was and remains (. . . ) *the imam* (the one who gives orientation, the guide) of all true believers" (Scrima 2004, p. 37). The identity of the person of faith, before being denominational, is existential in nature, and this is illustrated by Abraham.

Islam is a fundamental orientation in faith, and for the believer it offers the possibility of a decisive orientation. It is neither our concern nor the purpose of our study to rule on the validity or otherwise of the orientation of Islam from the perspective of evaluating Christianity. Rather, we are at a level where the question of truth is linked to the acceptance of this path as a path, to the assumption of an itinerant existence as opposed to a destiny marked by stasis or sedentariness. Defining Islam from the perspective of a religion that "reassumes" the itinerant faith of Abraham leads us, according to Scrima, to the following consequence: Islam "cannot but exclude the exclusion of other faith communities also founded in Abraham" (Scrima 2004, p. 37). The "exclusion of exclusion" is due to the fact that the three monotheisms share, through Abraham, the same sense of faith or the same fundamental orientation.

The rejection of exclusion is therefore not decided at the level of different doctrinal or practical issues that can be somewhat "overcome" in the sense of an assumption to the level at which they subsist in a new form of apophatic antinomy. The refusal of exclusion is adopted wherever the essential characteristic of a religion is to give guidance. If we hold this characteristic as one of the incontrovertible truths of a religion, then the argument for exclusion becomes entirely anachronistic since a religion that essentially defines itself as a form of guidance does not need exclusivity to assert itself as such.

*Giving the right orientation*, regardless of the form in which it is expressed: in this lies the truth of a religion. Abrahamic affiliation is nothing other than the assumption of the itinerant (orientational) dimension of Abraham's faith by the three monotheisms. This filiation is present in all historical epochs, the city of Jerusalem being, in André Scrima's view, one of the "stations" of this "crossing" (Scrima 2004, p. 38): the horizontal dimension of Abraham's itinerancy "crosses" with the vertical dimension of Jerusalem, the auroral city, a symbol of zenithal orientation. It is precisely when André Scrima speaks of the advancement of this dimension "through and between" the times of history that it is legitimate to think of the other "crossings" that are taking place, here in Christianity, there in

Islam, and further back in Judaism. However, this presupposes that the three monotheisms assume their itinerant dimension to the point where their itinerancy meets the call from above. Only in this way will the spiritual adventures of the three monotheisms become, like Jerusalem, places of genuine "crossings" and, in short, places of their true worth.

## 5. The Meaning of "Hermeneutic Diffraction"

It is only by starting from this level of their fundamental orientations that we can lay the foundations for a truly authentic dialogue between the three monotheisms. Only then can we critically examine the value of what André Scrima calls "the value of the hermeneutic diffraction of the meaning of this place (Jerusalem), a diffraction expressed by the spiritual life, doctrine and actual behaviour of the three communities" (Scrima 2004, p. 38). This statement is central to an understanding of André Scrima's reasoning.

First of all, he shows us that the fundamental "meaning" or "orientation" of the three monotheisms is by no means a pretext for evading the problematic nature of the doctrines and behaviour specific to the three monotheisms. Secondly, to affirm the existence of a higher "meaning" towards which the three monotheisms converge does not in any way prevent them from developing a specific understanding of the content of this "meaning" (through their own doctrines and behaviour); thirdly, the "meaning" itself is to be found at the origin of these diffractions, which we must not consider from the point of view of divergence but from that of their participation in the inexhaustible manifestation of "meaning".

The difficulty of any dialogue lies in articulating "hermeneutic diffraction" in its fullness of meaning with its deeper orientation. In other words, it is the difficulty of articulating hermeneutic diffraction as belonging to a reality that remains inexhaustible and apophatic. This explanation is still missing and is long overdue. A first step, decisive in many respects, would be to recognise these "diffractions" and to try to give them a meaning that starts from the level of their fundamental orientation. It would not be a question of "cancelling" them, or even less of "resolving" them dialectically, but rather of simply maintaining them in creative tension in relation to their deeper meaning. André Scrima's apophatic theology recognises and accepts the existence of these "hermeneutic diffractions" precisely because they are articulated at the level of a higher dimension, where all directions converge towards the summit: "When there is a summit, the further we are from it, the more we differ; the higher we climb and the closer we come to it, the more we converge" (Scrima 2008, p. 231).

The typology of a character such as Abraham and later that of Melchizedek receive validity from the transcendent reality of which the word that questions them is, in fact the bearer: "a figure, an order or a 'pole' of transcendence whose manifestations (*ἐπιφανειαι*) bind, until their final fulfilment, living bearers of the same direction of the divine plan" (Scrima 2004, p. 40). The adjective "the same" should not be thought of in the light of uniformity and sameness, but in the light of the fullness of meaning it gives to the constituent "diffractions" of the uniqueness and incomparable beauty of the three monotheisms.

An additional argument in this regard is the following verse from the Quran that André Scrima uses as an argument in favour of defining monotheisms on the basis of their belonging to the same "pole" of transcendence: "He has commanded you to worship none except Him alone. This is the upright religion, but most people do not know" (Quran 12:40). Worship is in fact related to the "orientation" which Islam designates by the term "qibla", and which, from a physical point of view, is expressed by "the act of 'turning towards Mecca' at the moment of prayer; but the first and last *qibla* of Islam remains Jerusalem" (Scrima 2004, p. 41). It is easy to understand that the gesture of turning towards both Mecca and Jerusalem is not justified by any historical, let alone political, importance of the two cities, but rather by the bodily expression of a gesture whose significance is, above all, existential and zenithal. In André Scrima's view, the orientation towards Jerusalem expresses the adherence of the faithful, their fundamental belonging "under the sign of the 'first' Jerusalem" (Scrima 2004, p. 41). A certain identity therefore flows from claiming it on

the strength of this orientation of faith offered by the city of Jerusalem above. The fact that it is not yet sufficiently deepened and meditated upon should give us all pause for thought. Exclusivism, a temptation to each of the three monotheistic religions, would be a denial that they belong to this core orientation of faith.

Jerusalem (and here we have another example of the paradox of apophatic thought), as a citadel of the manifestation of the transcendent, can only be, therefore, another "non-place", which André Scrima understands as "the overcoming of the individual or collective self, the inaugural celebration of a new love" (Scrima 2004, p. 43). Additionally, from this point of view, the "idolatry" of Israel, as André Scrima specifies, is not a denunciation of the idols of neighbouring peoples, but rather a continuous struggle against an "internal drift" (Scrima 2004, p. 47) found in Jewish monotheism: the temptation for the "place" of divine revelation to allow itself to be possessed in its very exclusivity (Scrima 2004, p. 48). The qualitative exclusivity of monotheism thus becomes an exclusivity of a quantitative nature. The notion of "non-place" therefore allows us to distinguish between "the idol/idols" as such and the idolatrous character that represents the "inner drift" of Jewish monotheism when it ends in exclusivism and intolerance.

It can therefore be seen that the real problem of interreligious dialogue is not related to the possibility of the existence of other divinities (since confirming or denying the existence of several divinities does not advance our understanding of the divine mystery as such) but to the fundamental attitude of the person of faith to a particular kind of questioning by which the divine calls them into being. The struggle against idols should not be understood as a struggle against the idols present in "pagan" peoples but as a struggle against the temptation to use the blessings of Abrahamic revelation for the benefit of a single people (or, to take a slightly clichéd image: it is as if we wanted the rain to fall only in our backyards and not in those of our neighbours). The "places" of revelation, says André Scrima, thus become "reserved only for 'me' and denied to others" (Scrima 2004, p. 48). George Orwell, in one of his dystopian novels entitled "Animal Farm" has the following phrase on the meaning of "equality": "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell 1996, p. 126).

The qualitative exclusivity of what a religion carries is not the same as its right to claim a particular superiority. The uniqueness of Christian revelation, in this sense, is not an affirmation that should rule on the impossibility of recognising the truth in other religions, since this uniqueness is about a certain existential openness of humanity to the Truth, and not about the limitation of truth within a defined religion, a "Darwinian" reflex that can only conceive of the notion of uniqueness in terms of superiority, the only truth worthy of recognition being that of the strongest. This is why André Scrima states that "God's 'place' is neither a limit nor a self-limitation, but rather a starting point, a centre of radiation" (Scrima 2008, p. 160).

Abrahamic monotheism thus signifies, according to theologians such as Stanislas Breton (Breton 1981, pp. 13–88), the uniqueness of a liberating experience, that of the Jewish people in the bondage of Egypt, and which he raises to the level of a universal experience for all those in a similar situation. The starting point of monotheism is therefore, once again, an experience rooted in the existential adventure of humanity and not, as the same theologian would say, a speculative reflection on the ontological attributes of a divine Being in general. In other words, Abrahamic monotheism is rooted in a relational language, later "transformed" into a speculative language concerning the ontological qualities of God. The uniqueness of Abraham's God, long before it becomes the main subject of conceptual reflection, is rooted in an experience of a spiritual nature. Such statements, therefore, only confirm the role of experience as the main source of knowledge of God. On the other hand, with regard to the mystery of the divine Being itself, what is required is respect for the silence that surrounds His presence and an apophatic attitude from which no one can claim the right to make negative judgments about the mystery present in other religions.

The words of the Saviour in in 14:6 ("I am the way, the truth and the life") remain inexhaustible because the truth in question, precisely because it represents the existential

definition of a person, is nothing other than a *relational truth* and not a *conceptual truth*. Faith is alien to any formula when it does not result from a determining experience. When Christ says of himself "I am the truth", he does not intend either to establish a certain exclusivity or to reject the existence of Truth outside his person. "I am the truth" means that whoever becomes his disciple finds the truth because the truth is the very authenticity of the relationship between disciples. In short: truth is the very relationship itself.

Seen from this perspective, a critical examination of the concept of "truth" becomes necessary. Is it merely an exclusive attribute (an attribute which in turn should be challenged as to the necessity of its affirmation) or an experience with the abyss of the divine mystery where the determining aspect is the possibility of the experience as such and not its exclusivity? The uniqueness of an experience does not need such a determining factor (just as, we might add, the uniqueness of a loving relationship does not need to be exclusive in order to exist). "Idol" is not a reference to the "idol" of neighbouring peoples but rather to "idolatry", a behaviour which corresponds to the appropriation of the qualities of the divine by "dispossessing the 'divine' of the other" (Scrima 2004, p. 48). With a reference to Gregory of Nyssa, André Scrima speaks of "the sliding of faith towards an 'idolatry of the true God'" (Scrima 2004, p. 48) and of the manifestation of an "essential inhospitality towards the coming of God and the freedom of man" (Scrima 2004, p. 48).

The mission of monotheistic religions is to sustain within themselves fidelity to the act of orientation, "fidelity in orientation to the heavenly Jerusalem" (Scrima 2004, p. 50). Their duty is to watch over their fundamental orientation, to remain faithful to their essential commitment which consists of their giving themselves to orientation and their persistence in this action. Looking towards Jerusalem ("qibla") corresponds to the gesture of "opening one's faith" (Scrima 2004, p. 50). Where does this openness come from? From the very gesture of looking towards the zenith. To embrace the horizon with one's gaze is thus to embrace its immensity, its characteristic openness. Universality, horizontality, and orientation are features of openness. Only that which assumes the dimension of universality is open. This is why André Scrima speaks of "the transcendent significance of this 'single citadel' for the three monotheistic traditions" (Scrima 2004, p. 51). The same author adds: "Up there, the crossing of frontiers takes place" (Scrima 2004, p. 51).

## 6. Conclusions

The fact that we cannot say what should be the ultimate aim of intra-religious dialogue (something like the "World's Parliament of Religions", as some fearful people imagine) is not in itself such a serious problem, because the aim is not to say the same things but to say the Same in our own way.

Having spent more than thirty years in Lebanon, a land of encounter between Christians and Muslims, Father André Scrima understood that, in order to engage in genuine dialogue with Islam, it is necessary to move from the outside in, from what has been said too much to what has not yet been said enough, from what continues to be said to what should no longer be said, and so on. In other words, Father Scrima's encounter with Islam was part of his "desire to delve as far as possible into the 'depths of things', in the open, honest presence of the most contrasting positions" (Scrima 2005, p. 96).

This authentic search to arrive at the bottom of things does not spare what remains problematic in this intra-religious dialogue, and which Father Scrima rightly calls "the most contrasting positions". For, if "the different must differ"(Breton 1981, p. 12), as the French theologian Stanislas Breton said, this "different", despite its multiple and contrasting forms of expression, remains, in spite of everything, the reality that "whispers in the depths of every being" (Scrima 1975), the Truth that we do not possess but that possesses us (Nashabeh and la Tour 2005, p. 44), "the point on which the compass rests to draw the circle" (Scrima 2008, p. 29), the lightning that "before becoming lightning, must remain for a long time in the darkness, in the black, dark clouds of the storm"(Scrima 2003a, p. 294).

It is undoubtedly because of these constant reversals of perspective that Father Scrima's theology has something very original and thoroughly modern for theology, in the sense

that it forces us to go forward constantly questioning, to go beyond "the official formulas" (Scrima 1965), to be, like Abraham, a person of breakthroughs and of new itineraries.

Since the goal of intrareligious dialogue can never be the absorption of one's religious affiliation into the religious affiliation of the other, it is obvious that the task of thinking about this affiliation, without ulterior motives, without proselytizing desires and with respect and tolerance for each other, is a task which is only just beginning. To accept that God can be at work beyond one's own confessional barriers is to accept that God can be present "even where I do not expect Him, where I do not yet know how He will come, where He is quite different from my tradition" (Scrima 2003b, p. 304). However, this acceptance is not an easy thing, just as with respect to new perspectives, everything still remains to be done. As Father Scrima himself said in a beautiful homily in 1985: "We have hardly begun to think about this" (Scrima 1985).

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## Note

[1] 24 November 1999. Scrima briefly alludes to this first visit of the Tibetan leader to the Holy Land in an interview in 2000, where he talks about another equally spiritually charged visit: the first visit of Pope John Paul II in 2000 (Scrima 2000, p. 11).

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