

EDITORIAL

In the last issue of Islamochristiana (46/2020) we expressed our hope that 2021 would be the year in which we left the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic behind. That was not to be, unfortunately. The virus has continued its course, adapting itself to new environments and situations, continually mutating and attacking above all the most fragile. The victims already number in the millions. The pandemic has heavily influenced the global economy and has limited interpersonal encounters, creating situations of great stress and contributing to a widespread malaise that was already running amok at social and political levels.

New balances are being struck in the world, but before a new balance is found, tensions normally augment. Violence continues to mar large swaths of the world, particularly in West Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, in Asia, and above all in the Middle East. How could one ignore the terrible situation of Yemen, of Syria, of Iraq, or of Lebanon? However, as this issue of Islamochristiana is being sent to press, the scourge of war appears also in old Europe, summoning spectres that Europeans had considered long dead and buried. This reminds us that peace is never acquired forever: peace depends on people's will for peace, which lacks when they distance themselves from their God. Al-Salām is one of the ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God and "God of Peace" is also a name for the God Christians worship. One must return to the acute analysis of the global situation presented in the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb in Abu Dhabi: when men and women forget that they are brothers and sisters, sharing a common origin, selfish individualism and nationalism arise and fraternity transforms itself into fratricide. Cain and Abel remain tragically relevant in daily events.

In this bleak picture, however, signs of hope remain. I limit myself to citing two from last year. As proposed by the Higher Commission for Human Fraternity, composed of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish members, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted Resolution 75/200, establishing that 4 February will be celebrated each year as the International Day of Human Fraternity. The first instance was celebrated online, on 4 February 2021, the second anniversary of the historic signing of the Document, a sign that, perhaps, the consciousness of being brothers and sisters will extend beyond religious discourse and become part of humankind's common patrimony.

The second sign of hope was the apostolic voyage of Pope Francis in Iraq (5-8 March 2021, cfr. the Dossier in this issue of Islamochristiana). Above all, three moments from this historic journey remain fixed in memory: the encounter at Najaf with the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani, which marks an increased engagement between the Catholic Church and Šī‘īt Muslims; the great celebration on the Plain of Ur, with the prophetic discourse of Pope Francis; and the visit to Mosul, devastated by war but desiring rebirth through the will of Christians and Muslims to work together.

Working together entails knowing and appreciating each other. From this perspective, the editorial staff of Islamochristiana has proposed an ambitious theme for the current issue: to inform readers how Islamic universities and Islamic institutions of higher education teach about the other religions. The pieces submitted are not too numerous but are very interesting. Morteza Karimi presents in a detailed way the academic structure of the prestigious University of Religions and Denominations (URD), based in Qom, in Iran. The University is still recent in its founding but highly open to the teaching of Christianity and other religions. Assem Hefni describes the history and the gradual transformation of Al-Azhar, the great and prestigious Sunnī university, before the modern challenges that question the function of Islam among the great religions of the world. Albertus Bagus Laksana concentrates on Islamic institutions of higher education in Indonesia, a mirror and possible foreshadowing of the transformation of Islam elsewhere in response to the challenges of modernity. Felix Körner examines the complex situation of Islamic theological orientations in Turkey and their relationship with “Western” theology. The authors thus provide a brief but significant panorama that touches diverse geographic regions but shows a common orientation of the growing openness of the Islamic world in dialogue with other religions.

In the section dedicated to Muslim-Christian dialogue throughout history, several valuable contributions are included. Hisham Mostein asks whether Patriarch Timothy I, in his famous dialogue with the al-Mahdi, the third Abbasid caliph, truly affirmed Muḥammad as a prophet; Antonio Cuciniello examines a fatwā by al-Suyūṭī regarding the return of Jesus before the final judgment and the rules (ahkām) that he will follow; Christopher Clohessy places the biblical narrative of the finger that writes the divine judgment of Belshazzar upon a wall in dialogue with texts from both Sunnī and Šī‘ī hadīt.

The section dedicated to contemporary dialogue also contains some interesting articles. Cardinal Michael L. Fitzgerald returns to the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together to present additional developments and possible applications; Ignazio De Francesco, taking the Italian publication of a text by a noted Israeli scholar of Islam as his point of departure, presents Jewish culture’s historical and contemporary approach toward Islam; Mariangela Laviano analyzes the thought of the Moroccan thinker Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Ǧābirī regarding “official” Christianity; and finally, Almudena Soler Sánchez devotes her study to the contribution of Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, particularly to the thorny and pressing issue of religious freedom in Muslim-Christian dialogue.

In the practice and in the study of Muslim-Christian dialogue, we continually find ourselves reminded that we stand on the shoulders of giants. We have chosen to remember three extraordinary men who passed away in 2021: Jean Fontaine, of the Missionaries of Africa; Emilio Platti, a Dominican friar; Sigvard von Sicard, a missionary of the Swedish Lutheran Church. May the Lord of Life welcome them with an eternal embrace.

The long section Notes and Documents, completed by a special Dossier dedicated to the voyage of Pope Francis in Iraq, collects a rich harvest of encounters, declarations and documents that recount the progress in dialogue between Christians and Muslims in the world, despite the ongoing condition of pandemic. This issue of Islamochristiana closes with a fine collection of Book Reviews dedicated to the study of Muslim-Christian relations, as well as some brief presentations of Books Received by the PISAI library.

Happy reading!

Islamochristiana