

REPORTS OF THE ASSEMBLY

Report by Philippe Bordeyne, president of COCTI, dean of the Theologicum, Faculté de Théologie et de Sciences religieuses, Institut Catholique de Paris, France

A Francophone assembly. It was agreed that French would be the working language of this regional assembly, that it would essentially be open to the European members and members from other Francophone regions. Hence, we benefited from the presence of Marc Pelchat (Université Laval de Québec), member of the Administrative Board. Léonard Santedi Kinkupu, another member of the Administrative Board had announced his participation, but had been obliged to cancel because of the disruption in his schedule caused by the ashes of the Icelandic volcano. The range of represented countries (Belgium, Canada, France, Italy, Lebanon, Poland, Switzerland, Ukraine) showed the importance of bringing together institutions from the Francophone zone. The aim was not only to highlight Francophone theology, but also to discuss the problems of the coexistence of several theological working languages in a same institution, in a global context where English is spreading, but where French enables one to communicate between different cultures and contexts, without maintaining exclusivity. Hence, the interest of making three working languages in Lebanon (Arabic, French and English) coexist was often stressed without masking the difficulties, the challenges and the limits of this choice.

Religious sciences in a theological context. A great variety of practices and names appeared during the meeting. In Lebanon, the existence of three faculties of religious sciences next to a single canon faculty of theology enables one to offer theological and pastoral training for different audiences (laymen, religious people, seminarists), and even to offer initiation courses in theology to students from other disciplines. Elsewhere, religious sciences are usually offered in faculties of theology (which are sometimes called faculties of theology and religious sciences because of this), but with a constant concern to make a distinction between methods and to implement religious sciences for the benefit of theology and its impact as a scientific practice associated with the confession of faith in an ecclesial context. With this clear distinction, and taking into account the diversity of the contexts, the interaction between theology and religious sciences was unanimously stressed. Lieven Boeve talked of a process of mutual interruption between both disciplines, the specificity of theology being to always highlight the question: « where does God reveal Himself today? ». This supposes that theology dares stress its original standpoint in the public sphere without hiding its interests in faith as faith, whilst never ceasing to combat the illusion that there could be a so-called “neutral” and more scientific approach to religions, that of religious sciences. Others talked of a “serving” theology that is attentive to the questions it must decipher and to which it must attempt to answer in a context of growing interest for religions, even if the perspectives are very different.

The fall of theology. On many occasions, the Western participants expressed their difficulty in drawing audiences for theology (equally in Belgium, Quebec, France or Poland, which entailed financial problems. But falling back on religious sciences and creating «religious studies» programmes, sometimes compelled by the orientation

wished for by the public authorities for the training of teachers of religion, do not seem to be a miracle solution. It is often because the outlets for the religious science graduates are blurred, sometimes on account of the fiction of a disengagement from the religious engenders frustrations amongst the young in search of meaning and not of methodological neutrality. But conversely, faced with this demand for meaning, it is the responsibility of theology to highlight the importance of standing back that is made possible by the human science of religions in order to better understand certain aspects of experienced faith and enable the latter to enter into a rational dialogue with other ways of believing, read the Scriptures or consider the relations between faith and reason and between faith and morals. Although the Western context could seem dramatic or defeatist to the deans of the Eastern Churches, those concerned judged that these new challenges were no more difficult to take up than others that theology had faced in history. Hence, the relation between theology and religious sciences appeared as an indicator of the long term work that must be carried out in our institutions, although differently according to the context.

Theologians at work in Lebanon and in the West. The participation, not only of Lebanese deans, but also of some of their colleagues, enabled us to highlight more particularly the topics on which our Lebanese colleagues are working. These include: the elaboration of a specifically Lebanese theology that is accessible to believers and «others» in their language and that is capable of capturing the imagination and the sensibility of the East, especially present in the iconography; continuing to make available historical, biblical or liturgical sources through the publication of fundamental corpuses; the initiation to the encounter with others in their traditions, religious language, present beliefs, spiritual richness and hardening or blocks. In a context where religious identities compete or still lead to violent clashes of which the Christians are victims, the need to learn to elaborate open identities that become richer through the encounter with others has often been stressed. It has been stressed that the Christians must dare resist, pacifically but without naivety, the progression of Islam, which is a painful reality. One must learn to reveal one's identity without ostentation, but without withdrawal or fear. From this point of view, the topics are also numerous in the West, even if they take on other aspects: adapting to new audiences, training clerics and laymen to think of faith in the context of detraditionalisation, where basic religious knowledge and practices can no longer be considered as acquired, but where, through argumented reflection, it becomes possible to meet audiences that were little inclined towards the intelligence of faith and religious phenomena.

The need for fundamental research. The emergence of the theme of religious sciences which, as we have said, covers very different contexts and issues, alerts us to new social needs. In the public sphere where they are often solicited, theologians must be capable of providing reliable data on Christianity and other religions in order to compensate for a lack of religious culture. They must also conceive training that is adapted to this new context, hence the elaboration of shorter and more compact programmes. But these answers, which we call theology or religious sciences depending on the context, must not conceal the need for in-depth research, based on the issues that have been identified in these different contexts and for these different audiences, since the pertinence of faith in contemporary society is at stake. It would be damaging if too strong a difference between theology and religious sciences led to neglect the importance of basic research in catechesis, in practical theology, in liturgy, in pastoral theology, etc. For if these ecclesial practical differences aim at a pertinent service of the intimate encounter with

God in different cultures, they must lead to high level basic research whose domains and methods must be elaborated by academic theology. In this sense, if the distinction between religious sciences and theology can be understood in the field of academic training for contextual and institutional reasons, one cannot resolve oneself to split up theology and pedagogy, or theology and the communication of faith, as it has been the tendency at certain epochs and in certain ecclesial circles.

To conclude, the president of COCTI warmly thanked the organisers for their close collaboration, for the way in which the issues were broached in situ in the different institutions, without haste, but also without fear of introducing the participants to the specificity of the Lebanese context. We were therefore able to hold open discussions that respected the differences without concession in order to express the partiality and sometimes surprising elements of the vision of others. This took place in a brotherly and joyful climate accompanied by delicious and abundant meals where we shared both earthly and intellectual nourishment. Those who were able to stay on visited the Roman site of Baalbeck and met Maronite communities in a Muslim context during the excursion day.

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**Report by Khalil Chalfoun, dean of the Faculty of ecclesial Sciences,
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I shall present some impressions gathered during the two Lebanese days of the deans of faculties of theology and religious sciences from various countries (Belgium, Canada, France, Italy, Lebanon, Poland, Switzerland, Ukraine).

Basing ourselves on the presentation of the thirteen Francophone faculties of theology or religious sciences, we found three modes of functioning:

a) Faculties where religious sciences coexist with theology. Often, theology is where future ministers of the Church or laymen are trained for responsibilities in the Church.

b) Faculties which only teach theology.

c) Faculties which only teach religious Sciences or the science of religions and which train those who intervene in religion «courses» organised by the States to teach religion in schools.

Certain dioceses train their future ministers separately in seminars that are not attached to faculties of theology.

Following this first observation, many comments and questions can be formulated:

1°) Maintaining the distinction between «theology» on the one hand and «religious sciences» on the other is a necessity. University theology which was the only place that trained ministers and teachers of religion courses becomes multiple. Certain dioceses prefer to train their ministers separately and rejoin university theology for the second and third cycle of specialisation and research.

- Other categories of students or professionals come to university theology for ethical reasons or to deepen their faith or their sense of existence.

- The training of the future teachers of «religion» takes a more pedagogical turn on the one hand, according to the norms of school education, and on the other it is more ecumenical and in dialogue with the other religions because of the diversity of the school

pupils (Islam, religious sciences, ecumenism, and openness to practical theology). Bilingualism creates in certain countries a fertile tension which stimulates the re-translation of the concepts and the search for a more adequate theological language. Every translation is a re-interpretation, hence a theological innovation. Having recourse to the language of an icon or a picture can be very beneficial and sensitive for students who are more immersed in the world of communication and of the audio-visual than we are.

- Theology always has a future. It is made more fragile by the humanities yet it is neither reduced to the sciences of religions, nor to religious sciences. In some countries, it is considered as a public service that is able to integrate populations who are ethically, culturally and religiously different. Although scientific, it remains confessional. It describes the faith of the Christians in a well elaborated discourse that is situated in context. Religious sciences must take the relay for a more specific kind of training or according to more diversified social and political needs.

2°) Any clarification of the stakes (for both theology and the religious sciences) can be but beneficial. Close collaboration between the two «sciences» can be but beneficial, both for theology and for religious sciences, in order not to forget the theological question of meaning, commitment and responsibility, especially for an audience that is no longer confessional and whose approach to “Christianity” is cultural or aesthetic.

3°) A new cultural sphere is emerging in the Western world: a plural society. We are faced with a plural and diversified audience. How can one briefly qualify it?

- It is post-modern, liberal; and it experiences de-traditionalisation, secular individualisation, indifference to the religious and a certain practical atheism. This audience only wishes for objective and « neutral » information about religion and religions (public peace is the concern of the States). Does this really exist? Certainly not. We cannot conceal our Christian standpoint !!

- Yet we are faced with a certain number of pupils who are the children of the Islamic immigration. The concern of the States is the integration and the management of this school plurality.

- A certain university audience from the Christian or atheist tradition wish for a deeper Christianity. Theology becomes the servant of the students who ask themselves about meaning, even if this does not necessarily lead them to become committed Christians.

- In post-Communist countries, school children experience a tension between liberal and post-Communist modernism and Tradition or the cultural and religious heritage of the countries where Christians experienced a certain suffering on account of persecutions. Theology is invited to articulate ecumenism and the rediscovery of the forgotten Heritage in dialogue with post-modernism.

- Last, Lebanon presents another plurality, that of the encounter between Islam and Christianity on the one hand and Arabness and modernism on the other. It reminds us that the status of theology in countries where Islam prevails is confessional and based on dialogue and supposes a deep knowledge of the Muslim religion and of the history of the Islamic-Christian dialogue as well as of Arabness and modernism as a critical element of religion. An Islam that feels at home with over one billion believers is not the same as the minority Islam of the Western world. To dialogue in the East based on a situation of minorities is not the same as in the West. This is the difficult task of the Churches of the Middle East: to survive, bear witness and dialogue.

4°) From this observation questions arise which can nurture our reflection, our debates and the way in which we are responsible for translating them at our level, that is to say the first, second and third cycle training programmes.

- Training means giving the necessary competences with a scientific rigour and a capacity for analysis in order to have a deep knowledge of the religions (according to the historical-critical method) of the world. This enables us to make the religious fact as such evolve which can be beneficial for all religions.

- Training means giving a taste for the dialogue of religions in a critical and scientific spirit.

- Training means accepting an ecumenical collaboration in a post-modern context. All the theologians of the different confessions and Christian Churches must work together, since they are interested in the question of God. Hence the importance of the ecumenical dialogue and of the knowledge of the theology of the other Churches and their faculties of theology and religious sciences; this enables one to better report on the commitment of theologies in the service of a diversified and plural society.

- A theology in a religious and ecumenical dialogue can conjugate Catholicity, our faithfulness to the Christian tradition, and the re-contextualisation of our reflection which brings to light the singularity of each theological discourse, whilst respecting the particularity of each faculty (biblical, ecumenical, practical, catechist research, ...).

- This finally leads to the following question that preoccupies us all: «Where does God reveal Himself today?»

- This will help us to make better use of the humanities (at the psychological, pedagogical, sociological level...) in order to better meet pastoral needs.

- Since it will help us to find an adequate language that is able to better describe the faith of Christians in a diversified society.

- Linguistics allows us to better understand what is part of oral or written expression on the one hand and bilingualism or trilingualism on the other.

5°) A debate also took place around identity and otherness for a proper ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue with modernism.

- Identity can be lethal if it makes us forget that theology is in the service of the search for meaning of each man recognised in his difference; hence the importance of listening to the present world and its deep interrogations about life and its search for meaning. Listening to the liturgy of the different Traditions also helps one to capture the different Christian religious traditions which, through the ages, answered the «question of God» which is of great concern to man. Through these traditions, the Christian Tradition that is different from other religious traditions can also emerge. The modern pedagogical tools must be used to better analyse our answers. We will thus be able to better differentiate between the theological discourse and all other “scientific” discourses in order to better transmit faith.