



Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the UN  
and the Oasis Center

present

## PEOPLES AND RELIGIONS

A panel discussion on the occasion of the presentation of the  
journal *Oasis* in the U.S.

with the support of Crossroads New York Cultural Center

Opening Remarks: H.E. Celestino MIGLIORE,  
Apostolic Nuncio, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations

Speakers:

Mr. Carl A. ANDERSON, Supreme Knight, Knights of Columbus

Prof. Seyyed Hossein NASR, George Washington University

Rabbi Israel SINGER, Chairman, Policy Council of The World Jewish Congress

H.E. Angelo Cardinal SCOLA, Patriarch of Venice

Closing Remarks: Mr. Roberto FONTOLAN, Editor-in-Chief, *Oasis*

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\*transcript not reviewed by the speakers

**Anderson:** It is an honor to participate in this presentation of the journal *Oasis* especially at the United Nations Headquarters. It has been a special privilege to serve on the journal's Scientific Committee since its founding.

On behalf of *Oasis*, welcome this evening to our panel discussion and a formal presentation of the journal in the United States. In the spirit of *Oasis*, rather than spend time talking to you about what *Oasis* is about, the panel will do what *Oasis* does, which

is engage in discourse and dialogue which we have come to find in the seven years that the journal has been in existence a fruitful and productive initiative for us.

I also wish to extend our gratitude to our host this evening, His Excellency, the Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, Archbishop Celestino Migliore. Archbishop has had a distinguished career in the Vatican Diplomatic Service with postings in Europe, the Middle East, Africa. Prior to his assignment here at the United Nations he was under Secretary of State for Relations with States at the Vatican which in other laymen's parlance would be the Deputy Foreign Minister for the Vatican. He has been a great friend to us, a great friend to those who are interested in the cause of peace and better understanding.

And so, without further ado, Your Excellency, if you would give us words of welcome.

**Migliore:** Thank you, Supreme Knight, for those kinds words.

I have the honor to welcome you this evening, and to thank all of you for attending the launching of the journal *Oasis* in the United Nations and in our host country, the United States. And I am glad to see that this auditorium is filled.

In the name of everyone present, I would like to greet our distinguished panelists, His Eminence, Cardinal Angelo Scola, Patriarch of Venice, Mr. Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, Professor Syyed Hossein Nasr from Georgetown University, Rabbi Israel Singer, Chairman of the Policy Council of the World Jewish Congress, and our moderator, Mr. Roberto Fontolan, Editor-in-Chief of *Oasis*.

According to the dictionary definition, oasis is a fertile spot in the desert where water is found, and sometimes people have been out in the desert for a long period of time without water and they see a mirage thinking that it's an oasis. Well, this journal *Oasis* is not a mirage. It is real, and especially for us at the UN, we are experiencing a great cultural fermentation which makes it difficult to agree on almost everything, and among this we need an oasis which allows us to find common values. Actually, we do have common values here at the United Nations. It is our charter, the UN charter. But we need to find a figurative pure and fresh water that allows these common values to bear the fruit of harmony, understanding and cooperation for the betterment of the world.

So once again I express my thanks to the panelists this evening, who will surely shed some light on this, as well as on the contribution that the United Nations is giving to the effort of making exercises in dialogue and mutual understanding. Thank you.

**Anderson:** Thank you very much, Your Excellency. I will exercise my prerogative as the first speaker this evening to speak from the panel as a panelist and not from the podium, but my colleagues are free to choose whichever venue they find the most comfortable and appropriate.

Because we are at the United Nations this evening, I would like to recall the Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the 50<sup>th</sup> General Assembly on October 5, 1995. More than a decade has passed since that address. And yet, the prophetic words of the pope have grown more relevant and more urgent. More than ever, they provide a realistic context for our dialogue.

John Paul II spoke of a common human patrimony of freedom. He called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights “one of the highest expressions of the human conscience.” The Declaration, he said, enumerated “the objective and inviolable demands of a universal moral law” – a law that is “written on the human heart.”

The pope told us also that nations have rights. “No one,” he maintained “is ever justified in asserting that an individual nation is not worthy of existence.” The pope affirmed that from this flows another right—the right of every nation “to its own language and culture.”

This global diversity or, in the pope’s words, “particularity” should encourage an “exchange of gifts” which can benefit and “strengthen the unity of all mankind.”

The pope reminded us that “one source of the respect which is due to every culture and every nation” should be a source for unity and not division.

“Every culture,” he said, “is an effort to ponder the mystery of the world and in particular of the human person: it is a way of giving expression to the transcendent dimension of human life.”

According to John Paul II, “The heart of every culture is its approach to the greatest of all mysteries: the mystery of God.”

Therefore we can understand why it is that the pope would maintain “how important it is to safeguard the fundamental right to freedom of religion and freedom of conscience.” He said these freedoms are “the cornerstones of the structure of human rights and the foundation of every truly free society.”

The pope observed further that there is a “moral structure” to freedom which provides “the inner architecture of the culture of freedom.”

In this regard, the pope reminded us that “Freedom has an inner ‘logic’ which distinguishes it and ennobles it: freedom is ordered to the truth, and is fulfilled in man’s quest for truth and in man’s living in the truth.”

Toward the end of his address, John Paul II suggested that the United Nations should be a “moral center” where all nations “feel at home.” It should be a place, he said where nations should come to understand that they are a part of a great “family of nations”—a family that is “based on mutual trust, mutual support and sincere respect” where “the

strong do not dominate; instead, the weaker members, because of their very weakness, are all the more welcomed and served.”

And as he concluded, the pope observed that he had come to the General Assembly as “a witness to hope.” He said, “The answer to the fear which darkens human existence at the end of the twentieth century is the common effort to build the civilization of love, founded on the universal values of peace, solidarity, justice, and liberty. And the ‘soul’ of the civilization of love is the culture of freedom: the freedom of individuals and the freedom of nations, lived in self-giving solidarity and responsibility.”

I have thought that there could be no finer foundation for the work of Oasis or any other center for dialogue between persons of different religions and different nations, than these prophetic words of John Paul II. And so tonight I offer this brief summary as a prelude to the discussion of our panelists this evening.

To conclude that prelude I would observe that Pope Benedict XVI has further broadened this charter with his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* – by so eloquently emphasizing the profound recognition of Christianity that God is love.

In closing, I would put a question to my fellow panelists: “Would they agree with the pope that God is love and, if so, would they agree with his predecessor that if man is made in the image of the God who is love, then all men and women can and should join together in constructing what John Paul II described so often as a “civilization of love?”

Professor Syyed Hossein Nasr teaches Islamic Studies at George Washington University in the nation’s capital. Born in Tehran, Iran, his distinguished teaching career began in 1955 while he was a doctoral student at Harvard. He continued in the classroom for more than 20 years at Tehran University before moving to America at the onset of the 1979 Iranian revolution. He taught at Temple University in Philadelphia, and in 1984 joined the faculty at George Washington University. Professor Nasr has authored more than 50 books and 500 articles that have been translated into numerous languages and distributed widely in the East and the West. A renowned scholar of Islamic, Religious and Comparative Studies, Professor Nasr has influenced generations of students with his knowledge and charismatic style. Please welcome our panelist this evening.

**Nasr:** I know this is the United Nations, but let me begin with the name of God whose compassion encompasses us all. It’s a great pleasure to be invited to this very important session. Your Eminence, I’m very happy that in your presence and that of some leading Catholic theologians and Jewish thinkers and rabbis, we’re able to discuss an issue which is critical to human existence. We talk a lot about dialogue, but in reality one cannot be very optimistic with the outcome. Let me not just spend my few minutes with platitudes, but with what I consider to be reality.

There is no one in this room who has had such a history of Catholic-Islamic dialogue as I have. As a graduate student at Harvard in 1957, I participated in the very first dialogue held after the Second World War with the leading Catholic theologians and Islamic

thinkers of Morocco in a Catholic monastery in the mountains. Fifty years have passed. Fifty years, and even now, unfortunately, there are many profound misunderstandings that need to be overcome. One of the reasons for that is that there has not been enough occasion to turn to the more profound and difficult issues which surely confront us all. First of all, all human beings today, given to the lack of the spirit, are in an oasis, whether they're Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or otherwise because we live in a desert around us in which human weakness parading oftentimes as religious force, but all that is negative in the human soul, including the birth of secularism, of division, of battles between religions, of violence threaten the great fabric of human existence. We are in an oasis. And unfortunately, very few people realize that. When Christ said, "Blessed are the peace makers," at no time in history has that been as true as now. We are now standing, these very days, these very months, at the age of (*inaudible*), and if we do not retreat from it, we will all fall into the jaws of hell, and we must all pray that this does not happen.

The theme of tonight's discussion is "Peoples and Religions"—both in the plural. I recall a verse of the Qur'an, the sacred scripture of Islam, which states that had He wanted, He would have created you a single nation, a single people. He created many people with many ways of reaching God so that they could vie with each other in goodness. Throughout the history of humanity, this problem was not so concrete except when Islam, Christianity and Judaism met in Indonesia before 1492, or when Islam and Hinduism met in India, and so forth. There were exceptional cases. But today we live in a world where, if we want to continue, we must have peace within peoples. To have that peace, we must have peace within religions. And to have peace within religions is only possible if religion continues to be religion; that is, if each religion is able to preserve something of its absoluteness, of its permanence. I as a Muslim have been a very strong defender of Catholicism over all these decades to the extent that once a very close friend of mine whose name I will not mention here was a Catholic theologian and very important figure in the Church. He said, "The way you defend Catholicism, why don't you become one of us?" I said, "I am one of you. All men of God, and all women of God really belong to Him whatever faith they follow." So we are in this very difficult situation in which we must seek to preserve what is really the sense of absoluteness in religion, or we're in for it. We can legitimize our path to God. At the same time we have to accept the possibility of other ways to God. Now to do this is very difficult. We have histories and we have theologies. And different issues come up in dialogue which often times confuse these matters.

Today, represented by the Abraham-founded religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, on the podium. In all of these three religions, there have been those who have pointed to the inscrutable and the serious will of God above all human reason. Oftentimes Islam is accused of such a fact, but we have the same phenomenon in Christianity, in Judaism, major theologians both ancient and modern have held this view, and we've had those who believe, on the other side, that human reason given by God, has a role to play in understanding God's will. So, the rejection of reason before the majesty, the *tremendum*, as the classical Latin term asserts, the greatness of divine reality, must be a part of the possibility of religious experience, as well as the use of this great gift that God has given

us—reason, which itself is a reflection of the divine intellect, a quality which belongs to God Himself, and which on the human plane manifests itself as what we call reason.

Now, the use of reason in various religions has not been the same. Each religion has had the frequent prerogative to apply the use of reason or opposition to reason in various ways. Unfortunately, from a religious point of view, for all of us it was in that part of the globe dominated by Christianity that reason rebelled against revelation completely. And left with the rise of rationalism and the rebellion against religion, about which the present Pope, His Holiness Benedict XVI, as a theologian, as Cardinal Ratzinger, wrote a great deal, trying to combat the secularism which is a result of reason divorced from revelation. I as a humble Muslim thinker could not more agree with him.

Another issue that confronts our understanding of each other is a question of violence. Now let me be very frank. We talk about freedom all the time, but today freedom is for the strong, not for the weak. We live in a world in which those who are strong can dictate their will to those who are weak. It's often done in the name of freedom. And those who do not feel that they have the freedom, but are preached to in the name of freedom, often don't react in ways which are terrible, and which are against the very religious values which they are trying to defend. This is the great paradox of our time. I'm not being a politician. I give myself the right to state these things very clearly.

Every religion has seen violence—the massacre of Muslims in the Philippines, or in Middle America or Central America, or Christians by Ottomans and visa-versa. Christian history and Muslim history have had many episodes in which violence has been carried out in the name of the religion—all the people who have forced Jews and Muslims to convert in Spain to Christianity or be killed, and this was done in the name of Christianity, in the name of the God of love. And neither Islam nor Christianity are freed of violence. Many people say that Judaism is free. Well that's precisely because for most of history Judaism did not have the power. During the last fifty years, when it has had the power, it's not very different from Christianity or Islam or any other religion exercising its power when it can.

Now this question of violence in relation to religion cannot be solved by simply name calling. We must understand in each case what the roots are which cause people to become violent. I do not believe that God created any part of humanity more violent than others, including the poor North American Indians who were all killed because they were thought to be violent, but those who killed them were never called violent. All human beings were created by God. We all believe that God created all humanity, not only a certain part of humanity. And such evil and vicious tendencies within the soul, such as violence, are fairly evenly distributed through all of humanity, whether we take the soldiers of Hitler or the Samurai, or the soldiers of Stalin, or other countries, left and right, carpet bombing in Germany, all of these show that this tendency towards violence is not unique to a people. And especially now, we must try to understand each other. We must try to understand the roots of why things were done.

My own co-religionists sometimes criticize me for quoting Dante all the time in my writings. I consider Dante to be the greatest Western poet, the supreme expression of not only poetry, but Christian civilization. I have a very great love for Dante. They criticize me because he put the prophet of Islam in hell, and I've already been taken to task for this. And my answer to them is that we must understand the situation within which Dante was writing. Dante lived in the theological world in which a prophet came after Christ and whose messages spread over so much of the world and for so long was considered in the Middle Ages of being the anti-Christ. Could he be put in any place but hell? The Muslims must also understand the deep historical reasons why certain events took place and why also certain actions were taken against them. It is very, very inopportune for all of us to compare favorable periods of our history with unfavorable periods of the histories of other religions, which is happening all the time. The Swedes can say how wonderfully peaceful they are, but when they had an empire in Poland, nobody talks about what they were doing in Poland at that time. I'm taking about the Swedes as the most peaceful nation. What about the rest of us? I myself am a Persian. The Persian Empire spread from Greece to India. It must have conquered many people. I cannot say, "Well, in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century we were so gentle, we didn't bother anybody, we were very peaceful." That's not going to work. We have to learn to understand each other's histories and also to understand why it is that a particular civilization goes through a phase of peacefulness and then goes through a period of violence. Unfortunately a different country in which violence is in the streets, and one must understand why it is that there is more violence in the streets of New York than the streets of Geneva, although both belong to Western civilization, not to just blindly condemn one or the other. We have to understand the inner causes.

Let me also turn to a very important issue which is the greatest stumbling block to religious understanding between Western Christians especially, not so much Eastern Christians, Muslims and Jews. There is a tendency in the West because of four centuries of political domination and power over the rest of the globe to expect everybody in the globe to follow the trajectory of development of the West. That's why such words as "development" and "underdevelopment" and all these terms were invented. We over-developed or destroyed the environment much more than under-develop. And these are relative terms. But the idea that the best thing that the rest of the world could do is to follow what has happened to the West is a very dangerous idea.

Most of you in this room are Catholics. You were not very happy when Martin Luther put that piece of paper on the door of the church. It split Christianity in half in Western Europe. Catholicism had to live with it, and now there's a great deal of friendship between Catholicism and Protestantism. Now many people in the West feel that the solution for Islam is to follow the same trajectory. How many people did Oliver Cromwell hang by Marble Arch in London? He was not a Catholic. He was part of a reform movement. How many witches were burned in Salem, Massachusetts? This is really a very shallow way of trying to understand another religion. Every religion has its own inner dynamic. Islam has no right to tell Judaism why is it that some people do not observe the Sabbath, but they remain Jews? Why is it some people eat pork and consider themselves to be Jewish? Or tell Christians why is it that some people believe in

Christian Science and others Catholicism? Every religion has its own inner dynamic, and one of the great stumbling blocks that exists today between Western religions, not only Islam, but other religions of the world, is precisely this almost unconscious idea that it would be so good if you just became like us. We are so wonderful. If everybody just followed our way, we would be fine. But that's not how God had planned it. Every religion has its own dynamic and the great tragedy in the world today is that the non-Western religions and non-Western societies do not have the freedom which the West had to experiment, to do all kinds of things. Religious experimentation, look at all of the Baptists that were kicked out of Germany and now are in Wisconsin. All of these things that the West experimented with and not have a major empire hovering over it and determining what it should do. So everything came from the inner dynamics of Western civilization. That was a great privilege that Western civilization had that no other civilization has today. God was constrained by economic, political, military factors. But let us hope and pray that in this context, at least on the religious plane, there would be that real freedom about which the previous Pope spoke so eloquently in the United Nations. And that freedom is the freedom to be oneself—the freedom to remain true to one's own world view, not to have to follow another world view by coercion, and coercion is not only by the bayonet, it's also economic coercion, military coercion, political coercion of various kinds.

The three monotheistic religions, look how much they have in common. Most of all, they all believe in the one God. That's the most important thing because ultimately there's nothing else but God. We believe in the Real, with a capital "R", "esse" as St. Thomas Aquinas would say. The same divine reality. We believe there is a beginning and an end to human history. We believe in the immortality of the human soul. We believe in the responsibility for our actions before God. We believe that life in this world is not infinite, that it has another life whose mode would depend on how we live in this world. Even the minutiae of our ethics, of our philosophy, of our theology have many, many things in common, and it's really very tragic that with so much in common we should emphasize those elements which our early civilization divides rather than religious divides, and which, if emphasized more and more will lead to a battle from which no one will come out victorious. So let us hope and pray that all those who believe in God, in His mercy, in His wisdom, and in His justice, and His love and generosity, will be able to speak together as a single family in a world so alienated from divine reality.

**Anderson:** Rabbi Israel Singer has been a leader in seeking to secure rights and protection of Jewish people for nearly 40 years, serving as President of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany and Chairman of the World Jewish Restitution Organization for Holocaust survivors. The son of Austrian refugees, he was born in nearby Brooklyn and began his career as an academic, teaching political science and Middle Eastern Studies at the City University of New York, and political theory in the Department of Politics at Bar Ilan University in Israel. He became Chairman of the Policy Council of the World Jewish Congress this past February, and previous to that, served as Chairman of the Congress' governing board. He also is head of the International Jewish Committee for Inter-religious Dialogue. Please welcome Rabbi Singer.



**Singer:** Ladies and gentlemen, there was a time in this building, it was said by the previous speakers, that for a few moments there was a transformation and it became a building which had God in it when Pope John Paul II spoke here. Tonight the transformation is truly overwhelming and I fear what can happen when the three Abrahamic faiths have absolutely overwhelmed this building it may actually transform some of its budgetary orientations to its initial and original purposes. It might even direct some of its objectives into a vessel which shall bear some fruit. It might actually become an oasis in which a palm is planted and whose fruits shall be able to be used and eaten by people the world over. I don't know, but such hopes I think are left only to religious people sitting on the stage and to those who come here with hope to listen to us. I think we share this moment here.

Cardinal Scola, you have in your wisdom chosen to bring *Oasis* to this building. It's not by accident. I think that the 192 countries that come here every day to dialogue can learn from what you have already done. They've been doing it here for so many years, to little avail. I think that in recent elections it might have been useful to have a conclave and choose you as the General Secretary. You might have done far greater good here.

I was with Cardinal Scola in Cairo and launched the development of *Oasis* this past year. And for those of you who don't believe that every year is a year in which the Messiah can come, or come again, depending on how you look at it, the truth was I believe that one of those two events definitely took place in Cairo. The process of dialogue is one which cannot be ignored and cannot be objected to these days because it has become one of the most important words that are used by people—even those who don't believe in it. And it has become de rigeur to accept as an approach.

In 1965, when the dialogue became something which took one of the aspects we're dealing with here—Christian-Jewish relations—and turned the history of the relationship between Jews 2000 years around in a period of less than one generation, no one would have imagined or could have believed that such a thing was possible. And yet the pronouncements of Vatican II and the commitment of John Paul II, and his personal engagement in the process, changed history unrecognizably. There are those who describe *Nostra Aetate*, there are those who don't even know what it originally had in it. They don't know the words. What happened goes far beyond what was originally called for. What developed goes far beyond the words written in the original document, which didn't even refer to the specifics that are developing throughout history between Jews and Catholics. Such imaginations were never dreamed by those who opposed the possibilities that dialogue could bring, and the developments that took place because of the commitment of the people involved changed a relationship that had been, at best, one which was uncomfortable, and at times blamed for events which continued to make a minority faith which had originally been the elder brother's contribution to the Abrahamic traditions, one which was isolated and victimized.

Ladies and gentlemen, if Jews and Catholics can get along after a 20-some-odd-year reign of Pope John Paul II, almost anything is possible in the world in which we live.

And I want to tell you that those who participated in the early days of the dialogue twenty years ago—and I have various quotations here from those who participated cynically in those discussions, my predecessor Chairman Seymour Reich is sitting here, who went to Castel Gandolfo in the cynicism with the rest of the group, in anger when only twenty years ago the dialogue was on its brink of disaster again and possibly with a break between the Jewish and Catholic parties. And yet in the days from 1985 until 2007, steps have been made forward that are incomprehensible.

I describe this to you because I'd like to take that as a model and read something to you that was written by a colleague of Prof. Nasr, by Shaykh Ali Gomaa, the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar only several weeks ago:

The rise of extremism in the Muslim world has led to the widespread view of Islam as a religion of violence, retribution and war. This is in complete opposition to the truth of our religion and, on behalf of the vast majority of the 1.3 billion Muslims who are ordinary, peace-loving, decent people, I want to repudiate the actions of a misguided criminal minority.

Firstly, they contradict the central theme of peace in Islam. Peace is the greeting of Muslims amongst themselves, the last word spoken by a Muslim in his prayers, one of God's names, and one of the names for Paradise.

Secondly, the Qur'an permits freedom of belief for all of mankind by saying, "To you is your religion and to me is mine."

Thirdly, the use of violence is prohibited in spreading the faith. The Qur'an explicitly states: "There is no compulsion in religion", and "Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good counsel."

I have here the rest of the statements written by the Grand Mufti and indeed it is an authoritative statement and a revolutionary one. I expect it to be published in total tonight with the rest of my remarks as a parallel to the statements which are being read here because it is what I think is a revolutionary operational attempt to take those whom the Grand Mufti describes as the people who high jacked his faith and who have taken his faith and have transformed it into something which it is not, and in an attempt to reach out has possibly created a modality which is as revolutionary as the efforts of those of Pope John Paul II.

God works in strange ways and through strange men, and *Oasis* is a project which I saw as a vehicle for such work. We have not come here tonight to describe the words of other people, but to initiate efforts that actually explain to each other what we really believe.

Judaism believes that no two faces are alike, and as their faces differ, their mindsets, their orientations, their ways of thought, their processes and intellectual orientations are different too. One could get the wrong idea that Judaism is a pluralistically oriented

religion. One could make the mistake in assessment that Judaism is some kind of liberal theological construct in which everyone has a right to believe what they want. Ladies and gentlemen, for those of you who think I'm saying that if you don't understand me then I don't understand Judaism, but I would like to tell you that there are those who believe that Judaism does say that. And, in a way, it does. We all have been created, according to Judaism, "in the image of God,"--all, all men, irrelevant and irrespective of what they do. There are those who in fact believe that the mark of Cain from time to time spreads across that face which God gave us all which is the same and at times indeed we take that image which God made us in and transform God in whose image we are into something with the mark of Cain by blood in his image. We have the capacity to define God because we were created by Him, in His image, to act in a manner which is godly, and when we act in manners that are violent, that are irreverent, that are contrary to tradition, the mark of Cain grows, and indeed, not only on our faces, but in the mirror image of Him who created us in His image because we define Him by not defining ourselves correctly.

Judaism believes that we can liberate ourselves, each in our own way, each in our own mindset, each in our own religion, as you heard from our colleague before describing Islam, each presenting their view. There is no convergence between Judaism and Catholicism in the Jewish perspective. There is no convergence necessary. Those who believe historically that the purpose of the dialogue is convergence, didn't understand those who wrote the guidelines for such dialogues. We each remain who we are, committed to what we believe, and to remain different in mutual respect, and to express to each other our differences and to continue to explain those differences in mutually respectful ways. This is what I saw in Cairo. It wasn't easy. This is what I heard in Cairo. This was the definition of *Oasis*—"and you shall be"—this is the blessing that the Jewish tradition has of the ultimate scholar—"and you shall be like the tree which has been planted in the oasis with the waters running by it," and its fruit shall be borne by that tree and eaten by those who are committed to its project.

We didn't come here today to commit ourselves to your project, Cardinal Scola, because we believe that the Patriarch of Venice has taken that opportunity which exists after he has seen the possibilities which have taken place in such a short time in our lifetime. Many people want to talk about Andalusia and want to describe a situation which existed a thousand years ago in a less complicated world, in a world in which philosophy was more important than anything else, in a world in which kings of Spain actually spoke Arabic and understood philosophy and were people who today we are jealous of because they had heads of state who had such kinds of qualifications. I don't mean to be in any way specific. The principle of the Alfonse concept is one which is not only limited to the philosopher king of Greece. They indeed in Spain had such as these. And for us who look back always to that with a sense of longing, it's not necessary, because we live in such an age—an age in which dialogue has changed the situation on the ground for something which was deemed impossible and incomprehensible only one generation ago. For those who believed that Jews and Catholics could never understand each other despite their differences and despite the fact that each will remain committed to the differences which they have, and will continue to have, should know that that possibility exists as well for Catholics and Muslims, and for Jews and Muslims. Not because it happened once before,

because it can happen again. And as you heard before, the differences are smaller than you think, despite the fact that a convergence will never take place.

So I come here tonight to tell you that what I saw was prophetic, what I participated in was Messianic, and what is happening in this building is unprecedented and probably never going to happen again, although you never know with Cardinal Scola. He's probably going to take the whole building over and make it an institution which might even have the word "God" spoken in it sometimes, and devoted to the possibilities whose God's name is committed to which is peace according to all three of us.

So, I tell you that *Oasis* being announced in this building is indeed correct and useful. It puts this building to good use. It should put some of the budgets in this building to the same purpose. It would be more effective, and probably, hopefully, more successful. The purposes of this dialogue, in my opinion, are to understand each other, not to make the differences mushy, unfocused, glaringly unclear. Our objectives are to tell each other the truth of how we are different and to still mutually respect each other, and to do so in a manner which God outlines by the definitions of His own men. And shall we hopefully, one day, greet each other with those words, and I shall be orderly and not read the rest of my presentation because there's no time, which is the only thing which we also agree is finite for each of us and for everyone. Thank you.

**Anderson:** His Eminence Angelo Cardinal Scola was appointed Patriarch of Venice in 2002 by Pope John Paul II. A native of Milan, His Eminence holds doctorates in theology and philosophy, and has enjoyed a long and fruitful academic career, the author of more than 120 academic articles and numerous books, two of which have been published in English. He taught contemporary Christology at the Lateran University in Rome and theological anthropology at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage & Family. He was named bishop of Grosseto, Italy in 1991. His Eminence served as rector of the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome and President of the Institute, from 1995 until his appointment to the See of Venice. He was elevated to the College of Cardinals in 2003. His Eminence founded the Studium Generale Marcianum for advanced theological and academic studies in Venice that same year. One of the most promising initiatives of the Studium is the reason we are gathered here this evening, *Oasis* magazine.

**Scola:** The theme chosen for the presentation of the review *Oasis – Al Waha – Naklistan*, promoted as the organ of the International Centre for Study and Research in Venice, can be fully elucidated only if situated in today's historical predicament, with all the complexity and conflictuality that go with it.

I usually describe our present predicament in terms of *the hybridisation of civilisations and cultures*. Up to now this has seemed to me to be the most appropriate approach to interpreting the *process* – I emphasise the word *process* – that is under way, and the most suggestive in regard to pathways we can follow with a sympathetic but critical eye to it. I need only record the impressive datum that two billion people are on the point of migrating. There is plenty of historical backing for this formula of *the hybridisation of*

*civilisations and cultures*; if used prudently – in the terms for example of the Larousse French dictionary definition: “*cultural production resulting from the mutual influence of civilisations in contact*” – it seems to me to be well suited to cast more light on the multiple complexity of the phenomena emerging from the unprecedented and inevitable interweaving of peoples, races, cultures, and religions which is forcing us not just to redefine the relationships between states but to think a new world order. At the same time I do not overlook the fact that we representatives of the religions are convinced that all peoples are ultimately part of a single human family, for they have in common an elemental experience (human nature?). We live in the certainty that there is a God who guides history.

To use the term *hybridisation of civilisations and cultures* to define the process under way in this era of travails, does moreover facilitate the task of interpreting the frequently searing content of the daily news, so that we can respond more adequately to today’s increasingly complex problems in areas such as peace, war, terrorism, justice, freedom, rights, or democracies. It is of course important to add that by juxtaposing “*civilisation*” with “*hybridisation*” we protect ourselves from simplistic ethnic and anthropological misreadings.

## **2. Fundamental rights, democracies and religions**

In the present context our reflections must focus on the social and civil articulation of this process of the hybridisation of civilisations, which involves religious men and communities being committed in the first person. One of the nodal points of the process of hybridisation is represented by the recognition or otherwise of the public value of religions.

According to scholars there is a conception in the United States - even though it may not be the prevalent one – that generally allows the same fullness of recognition to the religious motivations of each citizen. The Founding Fathers themselves sought some kind of “*secular state without state secularism*”<sup>1</sup>. The political and religious spheres are clearly separate, but the political sphere is disposed to dialogue with the religious because it is very conscious that government cannot produce moral citizens, whereas moral citizens are often inspired by religions to favour democracy. Thus for example the faith of the evangelicals - Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals – who are expanding fast beyond the United States in Latin America (Brazil), Asia, and Africa, and managing to make converts even in predominantly Muslim areas – is closely interwoven with American culture. Whatever interpretation we want to make of these religious movements - which must certainly not be underestimated - they seem to me to confirm the claim that “*There is an important lesson in American experience of religious diversity within a democratic political and social structure: the religious foundation of culture is broad enough to welcome those who try to live according to one of the three great Abrahamic traditions of faith [or at any rate to preserve] individual freedom of belief [or non-belief] and practice [or non-practice]*”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. A. BESANÇON, *Situation de l'Église catholique*, in «Commentaire» 113 (2006) 5-23, qui 11.

<sup>2</sup> C. ANDERSON, *Religione e politica nello spirito americano*, in «Oasis» 1 (2005) n. 2, 96.

In Europe however we find ourselves living together in a situation in which “globalisation emphasises a situation of cultural neutrality: for today’s western democracy all religions are ‘equal’ (in-difference). The public sphere is declared to be neutral towards the religions (...) The different religions are required and told to consider their universalism as a private fact, internal to their sphere of influence”<sup>3</sup>. Looking beyond these considerations of a contemporary historical order, there is a constantly growing tendency to oppose the universalism of religions in the name of *human rights*, the focus of an effort to give expression to a humanistic universal recognisable by all. This is supposed to be opening up a road to peaceful social coexistence in a pluralistic context.

None of us can fail to see the advantages that *declarations of human rights* possess. These have in fact had and still have a high *negative value* insofar as they constitute an ethical-juridical barrier to the invasiveness of political power in general and more specifically of state power, together with a high *positive value* insofar as they provide a language useful for ethical-juridical debate between subjects, cultures, and religions. Nonetheless we cannot conceal the fundamental limits of these declarations. Their universality is inevitably “abstract”. It relates to aspects of human “dignity” whose insuperable value is recognised to require juridical protection. Declarations of human rights depend on an *aprioristic axiology with respect to historical conditions*, and this of necessity proceeds deductively from an ideal anthropological model depending on a strongly committed consensus. Here is why the universality of such human rights is subject to accusations of being merely the universality of “a party”; especially on the part of *universalistic traditions* like the eastern ones which for the most part developed *in isolation from the travails that brought to birth modern universalism*. Can religious experiences somehow get round this limitation and increase their capacity for the nurturing of society and thus become protagonists of a more adequate promotion of human rights? I suggest that a positive answer can be given to this question. We need to think the relations between the historical subjects actually at work in our society – among which religions stand out by their unique importance – and the criteria for their possible coexistence.

On this topic it seems to me to be of fundamental importance to recognise the datum that the *humanum* as such (universal dimension) is always and only given in the concrete life of men and communities (particular dimension). Thus every community of men, with the cultural manifestations that characterise it, is the expression of the *universale humanum*, but is so in the historically determined cultural forms that are proper to it. The anthropologically structural conditions of a culture are universal, but they live in historical and communal forms of activity that are always particular. If this is the structure of the cultures to which human communities – and therefore also religious subjects – give expression, it will also be the foundation of their historical relationship, the presupposition of their possible inter-action (*hybridisation, interculturality*). But if the structure is like this, it will also be impossible to deduce from

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<sup>3</sup> P. DONATI, *Pensare la società civile come sfera pubblica religiosamente qualificata*, in C. VIGNA – S. ZAMAGNI (a cura di), *Multiculturalismo e identità*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2002, 55-56.

it the form and the result of the encounter – that is something we will only be able to know *a posteriori*. What will be the elements that are shared and/or recognised as universal is something that religious communities and their cultural expressions will define only in their historical encounter and conflict, admixture, and estrangement. To favour this process a State is required that would be capable of giving space in an adequate form to a civil society plural in nature, and which therefore would never be lacking in conflictual aspects. I am thinking of a State which is not “detached” and which, though not developing a specific vision its own, is expressly at the service of the person and of the ultimate exigencies which constitute the person (the desire for freedom and happiness, for fulfilment), a State which at the same time would make its own the great values that are at the foundation of the actual democratic coexistence (civil and political liberties) generated by intermediate bodies. Therefore not a State understood as an anonymous void container to be refilled at pleasure (a weak option that would in fact be unrealisable), but a space, certainly not confessional, in which, without neglecting traditions, each can bring their own contribution to the construction of the common good, in the inevitable and respectful logic of comparison and recognition that alone preserves the true nature of power. That is why it is necessary – and here I am thinking above all of Italy and Europe - to speak of “a new secularism”<sup>4</sup>.

This new secularism can constitute progress with respect to the traditional category of tolerance, which accepts the presence in society and in the social order of religions and of different cultures without recognising or favouring their potential for positivity. In fact through this vision of the *concrete universal* of religious communities, the originality of each religious tradition in its universal scope would be recognised, and in this sense we would be obliged to go beyond the logic that admits a protection of the various cultural traditions to the extent that they have common denominators. From the juridical point of view this proposal makes it possible rather for the protection of religions to acquire a “differentiated foundation”. For non-believers this would consist in the recognition of the benefit that a religion renders to the community; for believers, in the intrinsic value of their creed.

### **3. The logic of testimony**

How can representatives of the religions tackle this fascinating task of building up society in terms of following with critical eye the process of the hybridisation of civilisations and cultures?

The road that I wish humbly to propose is the one which has seen come to birth the review *Oasis* and the Centre that promotes it. We can identify it in the theme of *testimony*, understanding this category in all its theoretical and practical force. Testimony challenges every man and every woman, inviting them to become personally involved, to pay with their persons, and not to prejudge the limits of what can be achieved in encounter and dialogue with the other. Given the risk implied by freedom that is never definable *a priori*, nobody can ever evade *testimony*. Human freedom can never be “deduced”, for its full significance is given only in the act which embodies it.

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. A. SCOLA-G. E. RUSCONI, *Prove di dialogo, tra fede e ragione*, in «Il Mulino» (2006) n. 2, 369-379.

Since as far back as Greek philosophy, the fact that *freedom is for truth* has represented an undisputed cornerstone for the European *mind*. It has been more difficult for European thought to understand the nonetheless ineradicable principle of the *truth of freedom*, and yet the biblical revelation contains the theoretical nucleus of this principle. The truth is the encounter that takes place between the absolute transcendent foundation and the human person. The foundation is attested to the person in the individual act of freedom calling that person to involvement. The Truth is founded on a God who reveals himself in history to come to encounter us. In the Christian tradition then the truth, though maintaining all its character of absoluteness, is living personal truth. It is the very event of Jesus Christ, Son of God, who offers Himself to our finite freedom up to the point of allowing himself to be crucified. Truth therefore does not fear to commit itself to freedom.

*Oasis* wants to follow the chequered paths of *testimony*. These are not at all identifiable *a priori*. Therefore *Oasis* is a work that is always in progress. Thank you.

**Anderson:** Thank you very much, Your Eminence. Rabbi Singer a few minutes ago gave us the beautiful image of the work of the scholar as a great palm tree in the oasis. Our panelists this evening have given us three such palm trees and it is our opportunity now to reside in their shade for approximately 25 minutes and enter into a discourse of questions and comments, so if members of the audience have questions, now would be a good time.

### **Question and Answer Session**

**Anderson:** Thank you very much, and thank you to each of the panelists. Now I have the pleasure of introducing the editor of *Oasis*, Roberto Fontolan, for some concluding comments.

**Fontolan:** Thank you so much. Just a few words.

Ladies and gentlemen, as editor of the journal *Oasis*, I would like to tell you that I am deeply honored to greet you and thank you on behalf of our whole staff. I can say that we participate with emotion and humility in such an important and ambitious project, a project that over the last three years has grown big and rich in possibilities, much more than we could have ever imagined. Today *Oasis* is a place, a community, a crossroads of encounters and friendships. From Venice, and I would like to say thanks to Venice, *Oasis* looks out to the whole world and from the whole world receives nourishment, stimulus and strength. We have come to know, and thus we have made people know, the Eastern Christian communities, very rich in tradition but nevertheless so unknown to us in the West, from Indonesia to Pakistan to Iran; we have been able to probe the multi-faceted experience of Islam and of the Muslims, and the intense reflection that is taking place in such a large part of that society; we have been able to propose great chapters from the Church's magisterium and also from the great classics of Christian thought, from St. Augustine to Romano Guardini. And we have also been able to meet important



contemporary personalities like Afghanistan's president Karzai or prince Hassan of Jordan. *Oasis* is a place of encounter, discussion and exchange. Three years after being launched by the Patriarch of Venice, the Oasis project has solidified and by now it shows strong roots. I believe this has been made evident here today.

How are we continuing our work?

As I said, a sort of "community of thought" moves around the journal *Oasis*. This does not mean that everybody's opinions always converge, but our experience is that differences do not always divide people, but on the contrary they can be a motivation for unity and for getting to know the other. From this dialog are born our working ideas, the themes to be discussed, the contacts with new authors and collaborators, the development of meetings and participation in events and cultural initiatives. The journal is published twice a year, and all this activity rotates (by now non-stop) around our website, which incidentally, since last fall, has proposed the Pope's catechesis in Arabic. The journal and the website are managed by the Oasis International Study and Research Center, located in Venice, which constitutes the cultural and operational heart of the project, and which has also generated the publication of a few books. Soon the array of our instruments will be enriched by a newsletter. Hence, getting in contact with *Oasis* is easy, as well as helpful. It helps make our project stronger and more attentive, it helps enrich various viewpoints, it helps understand ever more deeply and authentically the reality of our Christian brothers of the East, it helps being close to them and friends to them, and through them ever closer and more friends to our Jewish and Muslim brethren. It is with this invitation that I want to conclude my brief intervention, thanking all of you for your attentive and welcoming participation.