Intra and Interreligious Dialogue before and after the Pandemic Distancing

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Intra and Interreligious Dialogue before and after the Pandemic Distancing[1]

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Abstract

The article describes the results of a study that explores the effects of pandemic distancing on the dialogue experienced within religious communities and between believers of different religious backgrounds. The design of the research conducted on Key Informants identified among opinion leaders of different religious communities residing in Italy is presented, after having defined the concepts of dialogue, as a method of encounter/clash between identities, and of secularism, as a critical attitude and as a field of game on which to develop dialogue. The analysis of the interviews reveals dialogue practices that show a distinction between dialectical conversation and a dialogic conversation that made it possible to continue the dialogue during and after the pandemic distancing.

Keywords: interreligious dialogue, encounter of culture, religious communities.

1. Distancing challenges dialogue

The life of people and religious communities has been crossed and transformed by the physical distancing required by the containment measures

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adopted to fight the pandemic (Ferguson et al. 2020). Thus, it seems to have increased the social distancing that Norbert Elias (1988) considers a patch of the civilization process on the basis of three characteristics: the most impersonal relationships, the standardization of relationships that would promote equality, and the relativization of the individual who would be willing to consider himself less central. Nevertheless, the combination of physical and social distancing would cause a contradiction: on the one hand, strengthening the citizens' sense of responsibility towards others; on the other hand, imposing a behaviour that is not spontaneously assumed (Bianco 2020).

The pandemic has shifted much of online sociality and religious practices into a digital dimension in which proximity between bodies has been replaced by virtual coexistence on web platforms.

Each community of faith found themselves moving along a double track: seek a new closeness with and among their believers without claiming the institutional presence or retreating behind predefined and recognized rules in the public space in ordinary times (Neri 2020). The distancing has alienated people in a time that required a new ferment of social ties, because history proposed questions of meaning about life and death and created a space for action for communities of faith, previously eluded or circumscribed by the processes of secularization. The perception of death has been reinserted into everyday life and the measures taken to stem the epidemic have also suspended all the established rites and practices that the communities have adopted to make it less acceptable and more shared: he pandemic: "has undermined all our symbolic and cultural defences. It has overwhelmed every gain deriving from the civilization process" (Migliorati 2020, 65).

Practices and habits in the world of religions have suddenly changed, there have been institutional proposals of the practices, conveyed by traditional media and social media (Padula 2020), other proposals have arisen from spontaneous initiatives proposed by individual faithful (Canta 2021) or by small communities (Turco 2021). Families and individual believers have sought and created new ways of expressing their faith and belonging in the home environment, moments of personal meditation, reading of sacred texts, devotional practices have increased and there has been a use of opportunities to participate in liturgies, offered on social platforms (Canta 2021). The reformulation of the practices on the one hand may have produced a media slip, which could lead to dilating and diluting the participation that would become less physical and more digital, on the other hand it could have supported the creation of a liturgical domestic space (Carnevale, Girneata 2021).

In the study we ask ourselves how much the pandemic has affected the dialogue between the faithful of the same religious community and between the exponents of the different faith communities. In addition to distancing, to

better frame the context of the research, it is necessary to consider that religions move in a secularized society where the traditional idea of secularism of separation between State and Church or between public space and private space overlaps with a secular relationship (Naso 2005; Canta, Casavecchia, Loperfido, Pepe 2011), that becomes the playing field on which to prepare the process of dialogue. Through interviews with key informants, we have identified whether the pandemic crisis has interrupted or has fuelled the experiences of dialogue.

The research has the exploratory purpose to identify the actions aimed at promoting dialogue undertaken during the lockdown and continued in the subsequent soft distancing period. In the first part we will illustrate the starting theoretical and methodological framework. Then we will focus on the analysis of the results: first we will describe how the dialogue within the communities took place and what changed, then we will show how the interreligious dialogue has continued.

Our analysis starts from the assumption that dialogue require strong but not fundamentalist identities that enter a relationship to bring into play the most intimate and sacred sphere of people and the value of diversity (De Vita 2002). Therefore, the protagonists will be able to identify and build rules based on listening and mutual respect, on the clarity and transparency of their intentions, on the relativization of codes of symbols and meanings (Casavecchia 2018). The path of interaction that is generated can lead to a *hermeneutic dynamic* that accompanies the protagonists to reach the awareness of new "truths" and to the sharing of a common knowledge built together (Gadamer 2001). On the other hand, the process of interaction can realize a *practice of recognition* (Benhabib 2005) of the dignity of each one in its diversity. Furthermore, recognition will also act towards oneself, towards the construction of one's own identity: in fact, the dialogue opens to the story of oneself and to the possibility of experiencing a narrative identity that is formulated, understood, and confirmed in the relationship between oneself and the other (Ricouer 1998). Interreligious dialogue, therefore, implies an opening of horizons[1] (Hedge 2007): the willingness to learn from the other and to meet him in a meaningful exchange can open to a new reading of horizons, which invites us to review our own traditions to reinterpret them under a new light, without confusing the different perspectives of the subjects.

How it will see in the conclusion, the results of interviews show on the one hand the engagement of key informants to promote discussion within their own religious communities in a period that has imposed the suspension of millenary

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[1] Paul Hedge (2007) develops the concept formulated by Gadamer to highlight that the horizon is the limit of our view starting from our point of view, it is the border to which our experience, our cultural baggage, our thought elaboration.

practices. On the other hand, the ability to maintain relationships and continue the dialogue with one's interlocutors in other religious communities is highlighted, without being able to involve one's network. Furthermore, two modes of dialogue are intercepted: once to find a shared synthesis, the other time to live a relationship.

2. Research framework

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed and is changing our life in the depths of our being and in its many manifestations; behaviours, way of thinking about the present and the future, relationship with our work, our way of doing research and thinking about some issues have changed (Canta 2021).

Some effects are already visible today, when the pandemic is still ongoing, although it manifests itself in ever changing ways, but many others will emerge in the coming years, when some processes, that are now latent and silent, have settled. It therefore seemed important to do research on interreligious dialogue, which for years has been the privileged field of our research (Canta, Pepe 2007; Canta 2017a; Canta 2017b; Canta, Casavecchia 2018; Casavecchia 2019) to verify how the pandemic influenced this topic. The limitations of face-to-face relationships have made even simple encounters difficult. In fact, the goal of the research was to verify the changes, the "health" of cultural and religious dialogue starting from the context of "physical distancing".

The main questions of our research are whether and how intra-community and interreligious dialogue - especially in the Mediterranean area, in particular in Italy - has been cultivated, in a time of crisis and stalemate in many aspects and fields, and whether there has been a change in the way of carrying it out or if it has been arrested. The focus has been on dialogue within religious communities themselves, where pluralism is sometimes ignored or tolerated.

The study starts from three theoretical premises:

1. the Mediterranean is a multicultural area of encounters and clashes (Braudel 1987; Cassano 2005; Matvejević 2006) and dialogue is a relationship that discovers the most intimate and sacred side of people and that becomes a method of comparison between different identities and communities when it respects dignity within a mutual recognition process (Benhabib 2005; Honnet 2002; Honnet 2017). For more than a decade, the research group has been conducting a theoretical and empirical reflection on this topic that involved subjects of the Mediterranean area belonging to monotheistic religious' cultures

(Islamic, Jewish, Christian) from different countries (Syria, Iran, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Lebanon, Israel, France, Italy, etc.)[2]

2. An authentic interreligious dialogue can only take place in a secular and open society, which contemplates within it respect for pluralism and religious freedom (Habermas 2007; Canta, Casavecchia, Loperfido, Pepe 2011). Secularism can coexist with all religions, even those that seem to be the most refractory and hostile to it (Filali-Ansary 2003). Secularism arises as a condition for authentic pluralism whether it takes on cultural or religious connotations. For believers, Christians and non-Christians, secularism is itself a form of dialogue, it is not a strategy of coexistence but the expression of an authentically lived faith. Secularism, then, is a modality and a method for building the city together with others; "laic – believers" and "laic – non-believers" have the task of building an equitable, just and supportive society (Canta et al. 2011). In other words, this confirms that religions inhabit a public social dimension that cannot be denied (Habermas, Taylor 2006; Habermas 2007).

3. Interreligious dialogue is inserted in the events of the geographical and temporal contexts in which it takes place. It takes on different modalities also in relation to the religious subjects involved and the dialogic experience lived (Filali-Ansary 2003). Therefore, experiences of dialogue arise in historically closed and hostile contexts and the need for dialogue in the context of new religious realities (such as the Bahai).

Starting from this theoretical framework, we formulated our hypotheses: has the pandemic influenced the practice of intra-community and interreligious dialogue by limiting face-to-face relationships and the possibilities of encounter? Have there been any breakdowns in relations and dialogue processes that have already started and/or are still in progress? During the period of the pandemic distancing, have new experiences of dialogue been activated, prompted precisely by the context of restriction that has also affected religious communities? Have the modalities of dialogue changed and how have they been restructured and/or modified?

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[2] The research group of the "Cultural Pluralism" Laboratory (PLU.C.) and of the Chair of Sociology of Cultural Processes and Religion of the Department of Education of Roma Tre, in previous years has carried out research, national and international conferences on these themes. Among others Living in dialogue: the places of a possible encounter (2008); Women and religious cultures 2008); The social mobility strategies of migrant women and the representation of associative practice as a gift and care for the social bond (2013); The Arab woman between presence and absence (2009); Dialogues with memory (2010), Voices of women from the Mediterranean (2017), which involved women (but not only) belonging to different religions.

The research method applied to the field is qualitative[3], through the tool of interviewing: fourteen key informants belonging to monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), Christian confessions (Anglican Church), to oriental religions present in Italy (Hinduism, Buddhism, etc), to new religious movements (Bahai, Tathata Vrindham International) were interviewed, or agnostics/atheists. In some cases, the interviewees belong to religious and interreligious associations (CIPAX, Religion for Peace) – who have experience in the field of interreligious dialogue, can be considered significant in the context of dialogue between religions (Table 1) – or non-religious associations such as UAAR (Union of Agnostics and Rationalist Atheists). The latter is not a religious community, nor an association with religious purposes, but it deals with and carries out activities, in a "critical" manner, on some issues concerning religions (rites, dogmas, etc.) and, in particular, it is active for requests for "sbattezzo"[4] of baptized Catholics and on the theme of secularism.

Respondents were chosen based on their role, significance and for their commitment to dialogue because we wanted to verify how much the time of distancing had affected the activities and practices of dialogue. Specifically, the research, of which only some results are presented, intended to question the same subjects as protagonists of the dialogue, belonging to institutions and associations. Ultimately, the subjects of the research are opinion leaders belonging to different religious communities.

The interview was chosen to encourage the subjects to express their opinions broadly. This tool seemed more appropriate to us to deepen the object of the research which has an exploratory purpose. In fact, for the data collection, the biographical interview was very useful. This technique has been adapted to detect a "focused" life story. Although the interviewees were free to tell their *weltanschauung*, the initial input directed "the interview towards a specific theme, thus carving out a narrative space from the beginning" (Bichi 2000: 50). The track constructed includes the following aspects on dialogue and secularism: the scenario in which the relationship between religions is lived, the meanings attributed to dialogue, the degree of freedom that is experienced, the dignity that is recognized, the opinions on pluralism and on internal dissent within the respective communities and the dream for the future.

The level of standardization of the interview is low, since the inputs proposed were related to the topics to be addressed, sometimes they have been remodelled in a different way according to the specificity of the privileged

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[3] The qualitative method identifies the behaviour that is expressed through actions, the daily cultural processes of construction of reality, the forms of symbolic mediation and the production of meaning (Merton 1970; Ricolfi ed. 1997; Cipriani 2008).

[4] An act to cancel baptism, a rite of access to Christian communities.

witness, in any case during the interaction the questions are not have been rigidly proposed. A high degree of freedom was adopted in conducting the interview.

TABLE 1. Subjects interviewed according to their affiliation and role covered.

	Belonging/nonbelonging to religion/self-definition	**Role**
1	Catholic	Founder and President of the Catholic Association "Women for the Church" (AWC – Founder)
2	Catholic	Religion for Peace Women's Coordinator (RP Coordinator)
3	Atheist	Co-editor of Micromega magazine (Magazine Co-editor)
4	Atheist	Union of Atheists and Agnostics - Former UNAA president (UAA – former president)
5	Catholic	Interfaith Center for Peace President (Cipax – President)
6	Muslim	President of the Tiber Association (TA – President)
7	Tathata Vrindham	President Non-profit organization Tathata Vrindham International (TVI – President; ERPN – Coordinator)
8	Jew	Union of Young Italian Jews President (UGEI – president)
9	Reformed Jewess	Reform Jewish Coordinator (RJ – Coordinator)
10	Catholic	Research Coordinator Centro Astalli (R Coordinator)
11	Catholic	Ecumenical Activities Secretariat (SAE - member)
12	Baha'i	Coordinator of the Public Relations Office of the Bahá'í Community of Italy; (BCI – PR Coordinator)
13	Lutheran Christian	Member of the Ecumenical Council of the Churches of Geneva (ECCG – Member)
14	University of Perugia	Expert jurist on interreligious dialogue and secularism (Jurist)

The use of the interview was considered essential because the protagonists are not only individuals living in a multicultural and multireligious society (Cesareo 2000), but they are critical social subjects who question the modalities

of dialogue for their specific roles. that they have in the context of the religions to which they belong.

The whole interview revolved around the guiding concepts of the research: intra-community and interreligious dialogue in a secular society and the dimensions connected to it, to validate the hypotheses developed by the research group. Based on the foregoing, it was decided to conduct video-recorded interviews, except for some subjects who chose to provide only an audio-interview, in order not to undergo the greater psychological pressure that the video camera can cause.[5]

After transcribing the interviews, attention was focused on the concept of dialogue. The most significant passages of the interviewees were reported and commented in the analysis, to respect the thinking of the protagonists of interreligious dialogue more faithfully.

3. The novelty of intra-community dialogue during the pandemic: the story of the protagonists

The analysis of intra-community dialogue needs particular attention, especially in a moment of pandemic crisis. This period brings us into a sudden change and forced us to modify habits and to consider new interior reflections in all areas of our life, and so also in the religious field. We try to answer the questions: how did the dialogue within religious communities develop and maintain during the pandemic? And what transformation has it undergone?

Something has necessarily changed, as some of the opinion leaders interviewed confirm. The transformations concerned the way in which religious dialogue was carried out rather than the substance. Traditional media and social networks have represented a bridge for dialogue within many communities: they allowed people to feel close in the distance and present in the absence, despite the overwhelming desire to return to live sharing.

Digital platforms, in fact, have joined the fundamental practices of some communities such as the Eucharist for Christians, *Eid al-Fitr* (the end of Ramadan) for Muslims, prayer for Islam or, again, the *Yajña* for Hindus. It is clear, as one interviewee states, that

> in some cases, some religions do not have a strong need to come together, to be physically in places [...] unlike Catholic or Orthodox Christians who need to join in the Eucharistic celebration [...] or to shake hands in the

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[5] For more information on the video-recorded interview method and visual sociology, see the essay by M. Loperfido (2011: 117-128).

moment of peace. [...] Or let's think of Islam that in prayer there is a need for closeness ... for Islam it was even more difficult (Catholic, RP Coordinator).

In the case of the Catholic community

one of the practices that was most lacking was the Eucharist, a fundamental moment for all Catholics, an absence, however, which could not be overcome until one returned to the presence (Catholic, Cipax President).

Even within the Hindu community it was possible to carry out only practices that did not require a physical presence: both last year and the current one, for example, in Italy it was necessary to postpone *Yajña*, that involve practices like the lighting of fires and a whole complex ritual that cannot be transferred online. Just as all those meetings that envisaged the journey of the Hindu faithful to a highly risky India in this moment of pandemic have failed (Thatata Vindrham, TVI - President; ERPN - Coordinator). In short, a religious practice was experienced in a continuous *state of exception* dictated by a moment of necessity, which we hope will be temporary.

The experiences of dialogue within and between religious communities have been reorganized in different ways, according to the ability of each to react to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, and above all they have seen a transformation of custom.

All communities have seen a shift in online activities. The events that were normally organized periodically and provided for the presence of hundreds of representatives were cancelled. In some ways we have all been a little creative (Thatata Vindrham, TVI - President; ERPN - Coordinator).

However, if that part of corporeal and physical symbology that characterizes the fundamental relationships for practices and worship is missing, digital devices have made it possible to establish a new communicative space and accompany the faithful of various communities: the Jewish Youth Union, Religion for Peace, the Psychoanalytic Institute for Social Research, the Secretariat for Ecumenical Activity, CIPAX, the Catholic Feminist Association, just to mention some of which we interviewed the members. All the communities have found a way to maintain a certain constancy in dialogue during a period that would otherwise have caused the absence and crumbling of comunity practices: the meeting and internal sharing, in fact, represent the "raw materials" for the very existence of the communities which otherwise would turn into *isolated singularities*.

> Dialogue is only the first moment in which religions understand that they cannot live exclusively and seek to know (the other) in order to relate and understand, that they try to answer a unique question of meaning. The moment of meeting, therefore, comes immediately after. It is important to be together, not just to talk: to be together, to do things together, to share activities. Create opportunities with others, for exchange and cultural encounter. And prepare occasions together (Catholic, Cipax President).

Therefore, digital platforms have represented a tool that made possible to "diversify the offer", reach more people and develop different themes. It was important to allow "sympathizers", who for various reasons could not physically participate, to interact again with the group they belong to (Thatata Vindrham, TVI – President; ERPN – Coordinator) and to maintain an internal cohesion. There are those who have welcomed this online experience as an opportunity to intensify participation in the initiatives of their communities: the method on the web allowed the involvement not only of those who are geographically distant but also of those who had moved away from religious worship.

> There were also benefits, in the sense that – I believe – that even when there was no longer any danger, the tools we are using in this period will not be forgotten, because a total return to the pre-pandemic I do not think that it will be. In the sense that useful tools have also been rediscovered! We certainly noticed a rapprochement of people who, for various reasons, had lost sight of a bit [...] an increase in requests for interaction. The psychological distress and forced isolation have led some people to request to reconnect. Reorganizing online practices has restored strength because it has cushioned the loneliness. [...] (Thatata Vindrham, TVI – Presindent; ERPN – Coordinator).

In addition, the Union of Young Italian Jews (UGEI), in an attempt to involve the older and less young people of its community[6], has renewed some practices. So says the UGEI President:

> last year, for this modality that the surrounding pandemic situation forced us to set up, we looked at each other for a moment and we said: "but do we want to remain idle, or do we want to think of something feasible, that can make this year profitable?" And I would say that we have reinvented ourselves online very well, even with professional tools [...] also because the online attention is much much lower [...]. We have tried to set up the activities

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[6] The cohort of young people referred to by the interviewee's association is very large, ranging from around 18 to 35 years of age.

in a certain way, since we have also addressed an audience of young people ranging from 18, 19, 20, 21 but also 30, 35, 40 years (Jew, UGEI - President).

In a multiform way, therefore, UGEI – as well as other communities – has transformed digital technology into a tool suitable for everyone, flexible to every type of need, suitable for the different questions of meaning. Among the ingredients adopted to carry out the intracommunity dialogue there are short conferences, daily meditation pills of 2/3 minutes, podcasts, innovative blogs, magazines. But above all, it is tried to be attentive to everything, to listen to the simplest requests, trying to involve everyone and not make anyone feel excluded: perhaps it is precisely on this that the dialogue is based. This, for example, was the purpose of the "Ask a Jew", a non-institutionalized site launched by UGEI that aimed at anyone wishing to learn more about Judaism and wanting to submit a variety of questions to experts. This site, during the pandemic, represented an innovative tool, especially aimed at those who were curious to know the Jewish community.

During the pandemic period we may have been able to react more readily than others, such as the Union of Agnostics and Rationalist Atheists (UAAR). This group has always been "passionate about science and technology" (Atheist, UAA – former president); its members are used to meeting often online. The Union was therefore less penalized by the transition period, despite the fact that it complained of a sort of discrimination against itself.

In fact, if other religious confessions had the opportunity to meet face-to-face, when it was possible again, the UAAR had not the same chance:

we have been treated as just any office. So we have been closed much more than the churches, the synagogues, the mosques have been. This surely derives from a non-acceptance of a religious doctrine. Religious freedom is made up of the freedom to choose it and not have any[7] (Atheist, UAA – former president).

The same question is repeated for example by the Hindu interviewee. Her community – unlike the Italian Hindu opinion - did not reach an agreement with the Italian Republic and consequently did not obtain benefits regarding the reopening of places of worship (Thatata Vindrham, TVI – President; ERPN – Coordinator).

Another very interesting experience is the one told by the President of the Women for the Church Association, who complain about the approach of the

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[7] The UAAR is not considered a religious confession in our legal system by virtue of recent jurisprudence that endorsed the government's refusal to consider the institution as a religious confession (sent. n. 52/2016, Constitutional Court; Canonico M. 2016).

Catholic Church and the Clergy that was not very innovative and rigid in roles. Although many parishes have tried to make up for the distance with masses, meditations from convents, rosaries, and novenas in streaming, they have reproduced in a small way a media diet already present in the panorama of the Catholic world: the Catholic Church has, in fact, its own channel in public television (TV2000).

> In such a dramatic and lonely moment, instead of working on the sense of community trying to keep contacts alive (some did), make an extra phone call, make available material for reflection that was scarce at that moment, this path of masses, novenas, *via crucis* and everything in streaming is chosen (Catholic, AWC - Founder).

In particular, the "paralyzed" and traditional approach of the Catholic Church was strongly criticized because the typical power relations were re-proposed by moving them from a physical to a virtual reality. If the lockdown could represent the right opportunity to redesign relations within the community, this was not the case, the most hopeful and enthusiastic lay faithful could have become: the priest, and he alone, continued to manage the various tasks.

A small hope was foreseen, for example, with the "subsidy for family prayers", an innovative tool launched by the Church during the first lockdown. It represented a means of transforming families into protagonists of the church and not mere spectators. Homemade bread and broken together with the whole family, reading the Gospel, lighting candles during Lent and Easter, blessing rites: these were all new experiments that allowed us to be celebrants at home (Catholic, Catholic, AWC - Founder). These gestures and actions have helped to establish not only a dialogue within individual families but also between families. These were able to feel close and intimate in such a dramatic moment and were able to share their faith with meetings on social platforms. Unfortunately, however, it was an intense but short experience that died out shortly after:

> (it has been forgotten) that for some the instrument of domestic liturgies was a beautiful discovery. This (instrument) thus fell without taking into account the needs, as if it had been an accident on the way […]. This was a somewhat short-sighted choice. It seems to me as if we had had the opportunity of the century and had not exploited it (Catholic, AWC - Founder).

As a counterbalance to this negative experience, however, we found a completely positive experience, that of a Muslim community in Rome, which has drawn some new lessons from the restrictions due to COVID-19. In normal

times, the most important celebrations, such as the Friday Prayer, become spaces dedicated "exclusively" to men, because their presence, unlike that of women, is mandatory. With the pandemic, on the contrary, "women have begun to listen to homilies" (Muslim, TA - President). Digital technology has made it possible to break down some barriers raised to discriminate against women who are still present today in many areas and who deserve a separate discussion. Another novelty concerned the modality of Eid al-Fitr, the breaking of the fast on the occasion of Ramadan, which had to face a new organization: the celebration of the rite could not be lived in presence together with others. Then digital platforms were used to create a virtual sharing space to which people not belonging to the religious community were also invited. This initiative was truly innovative since the traditional rite takes place in the presence and only with the Muslim faithful. This moment has therefore turned into an "act of dialogue" (Muslim, TA - President) intra and inter-community for many and an opportunity to exchange information on religious practices. In short, if the pandemic has undermined many of the certainties of the human being and has brought out many problems, it has certainly not mitigated the need for true relationships and dialogue within communities, which has often intensified and found different and creative forms of expression. However, "humans need vaccines against epidemics, but they also need moral strength to use to face the dangers that threaten their existence" (Ed Difdai 2020).

4.   Interreligious dialogue in distancing and after

Inter-religious dialogue since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) has assumed great importance in the public debate, not only for the Catholic Church (Canta 2014) but for all religious communities, probably with an accelerating effect after the terrorist attacks of the Twin Towers in 2001.

Promoting and supporting values that can foster social justice, peace and freedom are still cornerstones of the dialogue between different religious experiences and subjectivities and are configured as common objectives shared by the agendas of all religions.

The exponents of the religious communities who participated in the research have met the same fate, recalibrating their activities and online meetings. Religious life has reorganized itself in a domestic space where the boundary between private and public has been mixed, crossed, and confused. In response to the need to give continuity to everyone's spirituality, computers, microphones, and webcams have been switched on, communicating at a distance (Padula 2020).

The ways in which religious discourses and practices new forms of reorganization and practices have emerged in this period and vary from group to group, from community to community, just as new form of dialogue and relationships, both within communities and towards the outside world, such as underlining an interviewed:

> Religion for Peace found a right way to relate, besides the meeting there were prayers in common: in common in the sense that each participated with their own religious culture in meetings on the subject, for example, of populations defrauded of their rights. Here then everyone reads his prayer, his psalm [...] and this too is interesting! (Jew, RJ - Coordinator).

Therefore, although the social distancing of the pandemic has reduced physical proximity, the situation of discomfort and isolation has produced a rediscovery of the spiritual need and accelerated another aspect of social relations: similarity. The pandemic has brought people closer to their religious practice, not physically but from a point of view of spiritual recognition and liberation from loneliness. According to the interviewee, these tools were also a stimulus to activate interreligious dialogue. However, the interviews revealed profound differences in the way of perceiving the impact of the pandemic on the way of interacting online between religious communities:

> In my opinion, interreligious dialogue has cooled down, because it is not generally used to the online usability of meetings, liturgies, and then it must be said that during the first pandemic phase the major clusters occurred within religious gatherings [...] It is evident that in religions the physical need to share the koiné, the religious community is undoubtedly based on physicality, on this undoubtedly the pandemic has cooled especially inter-religious relationships and less relationships in individual communities (Atheist, UAA – former president).

The interviewee underlines that sharing a concrete and physical as well as spiritual exchange may have discouraged interreligious dialogue, also due to the fear of contagion and the distrust of meeting in person, due to the situation and not very encouraging examples of contagion clusters, identified precisely during religious meetings. Another problem of online encounters is also linked to the relationship between people *per se*, in human relationships practiced by individuals as a form of sociality:

> if I already know a person well, there is no problem talking online because there is already knowledge, at least for a certain period. If the knowledge is new, it is very difficult because there is still no basis of trust, a basis of

> friendship [...] therefore the dialogue between people who already know each other certainly survives [...] but the dialogue is not a framework that he paints himself and puts himself on the wall and we look at it, dialogue is a process, it is something that develops and moves [...] and for this we need to integrate new people and also meet in person, because it is like a friendship [...] it is a relationship (Lutheran, ECCG – Member).

From the interviewee's words, a specific complexity emerges in the holding of the confrontation and in the relational processes online, which seem – in her vision – depleted of something "because at a certain point it becomes complicated" (Lutheran, ECCG – Member). Trust and friendship are *human* indicators of the well-being of an entire community and are important components of social relationships (Donati 2020). Continuing the reasoning on online relationships, the interviewee focuses on an important point:

> After 2001 and the attacks on the twin towers, for my work I asked myself what can I do to improve the situation for dialogue and peace? At that time, I decided to make a trip every year to a Muslim country: Iran, Egypt, Morocco. And I discovered many positive initiatives for dialogue on the part of Muslims, I found many friends and hospitality [...] but you can only do this live you cannot do it online, via digital or telephone (Lutheran, ECCG – Member).

Thus, the body, understood as a vehicle and means by which social relations are built, is necessary to nourish the bond with other religious subjectivities and maintain it over time, especially from the perspective of interreligious dialogue. In fact, what helps the construction of the social bond is spatial proximity since proximity (even physical) creates familiarity between people and connects mutual intentions and expectations; the organization and perception of society is rooted in the body, in the sense that it is a device that shapes experience and leads to the articulation of social reality (Scheper Hughes, Lock 1987). Furthermore, the trust sustained by *face to face* encounters unites words with the language of the unspoken or of the body (facial expressions, looks, pauses in speech, postures and gestures) generating a type of interreligious bond that becomes a stable structure of relationships based on of a shared experience. Another difficulty that emerges in maintaining interreligious dialogue is the great issue of the security and privacy of those who are confronted online. In this sense, the pandemic has exacerbated social inequalities and impacted differently on religious freedoms because:

> There are regimes that have taken advantage of the pandemic and for people it is an even greater danger, perhaps just because you want to do your job. Even one sentence can get you in trouble! (Lutheran, ECCG – Member).

The difference was also perceived in the public space dedicated to the different forms of belonging:

> We have seen during the lockdown in full pandemic the preponderant presence of the Catholic religion in our media: masses, papal messages, Rai broadcast from Santa Marta. [...] There has been another discrimination [...] and the churches are always open, the masses and liturgical activities of other minorities were among the first to restart, instead we were considered within the expression of religious freedom, but we remained closed like any office without the possibility of meeting […] this is certainly a disparity in the acceptance of a doctrine that is now 40 years old (Atheist, UAA – former president).

The pandemic was an event that moved religious practice from physical places to the digital world, yet it did not change the spirit of encounter to the whole of society. Despite the impactful event of the pandemic, the importance of religious dialogue, as it had already been identified by the Second Vatican Council, has remained:

> Regarding interreligious dialogue today, the focus is on public action, that is, on the ability to create coalitions of alliances between different spiritual traditions in being able to face the challenges of today's society. There is also a lot of work with respect to mutual knowledge and the search to make the divisive and aggressive phenomena deriving from a lack of knowledge less dangerous! […] Collaborating means having a greater impact on the major issues of society. [...] Interreligious dialogue is a resource for inclusion and social cohesion (Thatata Vindrham, TVI – President; ERPN - Coordinator).

Among the fundamental elements for continuing the practice of a fruitful and virtuous interreligious dialogue it is the dimension of secularism as a paradigm of confrontation: "The importance of interreligious dialogue lies in secularism. Without secularism there is no dialogue!" (Atheist, UAA – former president). Secularism is not a principle that hinders the comparison between religions or that stands as a paradigm opposing the practice of different forms of religiosity, but a guarantee for freedom and pluralism, "Religious freedom can be said to be a prerequisite for all other freedoms! [...] Secularism as a method is a rule of the Italian Constitution! We are secular because we are pluralist" (Catholic, AWC - Founder).

Therefore, laicity is a shared basic principle, from which to start a public debate, an inter-religious dialogue free from radical drifts that do not allow the overcoming of closed positions and the breaking down of walls and identity fences:

> I consider it important that interreligious dialogue is confronted with the atheists, it is also important to confront another world, even far from religious symbols [...] there should be an expansion to an external dialogue [...] with all citizens! (Jew, RJ - Coordinator).

5.   In conclusion

Dialogue has survived distancing both at an intra-community level and at an inter-religious level. *Physical distancing* has somehow prompted the search for relationships. The shared condition of feeling attacked, and hit is the first common trait that emerges from the stories of the opinion leaders interviewed. For them, the pandemic is seen as a "great attack" (Jew, RJ - Coordinator) that "has unhinged our points of reference" (Catholic, RP Coordinator). The measures to combat the pandemic required the interruption of millennial rituals, which were expressed in the community dimension within the same physical space. A dimension, which for Durkheim (2013) was already recognized as an element of social cohesion, has disappeared. The absence questioned the profound identity of the communities because shared practices and rituals intervene in the relationship between the faithful and between the faithful and institutions. They mark the distinctive and recognizable features of a culture. The attempts reported in the interviews were aimed at establishing a dialogue within digital spaces.

Secularism as a critical/constructive attitude initially emerged when two attentions were noted: first of all the request to get involved and to overcome some rules and habits that condition the way of life within one's community and which were suspended during the lockdown; moreover, it is considered a prerequisite for dialogue, even if it remains within a plural meaning: both a principle of neutrality, which at times tends to diminish differences, and a space for convergence and guarantee of otherness.

Inside the faith communities, the practice of dialogue has not been suspended or postponed, on the contrary. There was a horizontal action that was born from the faithful, and there was another vertical one that was proposed by religious institutions. The first is to observe the initiatives made to share shared reflections and meditations or to involve individual faithful or families: on the one hand they have become protagonists in prayer and in the proposal of domestic liturgies, on the other the initiatives have stimulated the

search for comparison between peers (Catholic, AWC - Founder). The second had two purposes: to propose activities to involve practicing men do believers (Jew, UGEI president) or to offer ways to "accompany the faithful" (Catholic, Cipax - President) at a time when many religious practices have been exempted (Hindu, ERPN - Coordinator).

Sometimes the result produced a digital copy of traditional and customary practices at the expense of the search for personal care, felt as an important action in a period of crisis (Catholic AWC - Founder), other times they had an unexpected effect such as the involvement of women in the Friday prayers of Muslims (Muslim, TA President).

A second research topic is aimed at analysing the challenge that distancing has launched to the dialogue between religions and the subjects who promote it. Some indications emerged from the interviews: first of all, the difficulties in starting paths with new subjects, because the first steps are facilitated by the face-to-face meeting (Lutheran, ECCG – Member); secondly, the confirmation of the awareness that dialogue with the other calls for reflexivity, because "in front of the other it is understood that one tries to answer the only question of meaning" (Catholic, R Coordinator); finally, the solidity of the paths already started which have continued without changing the substance, but varying the modalities and have become a prerequisite for the initiatives carried out, when it has been possible to return to the presence (Catholic, RP Coordinator).

The two different thematic areas allow us to outline two modes and two different levels of dialogue that Richard Sennet summarized in the distinction between *dialectical conversation* and *dialogic conversation*. The first case is encountered when attention is directed to grasping a meeting point to make a synthesis. Once you reach the middle, you are satisfied with the success. Attempts at dialogue, among those encountered, aimed at making an appointment, at providing food for thought, propose a prayer or discussion on an initiative, fall into this typology. Often the *dialectical conversation* can be traced back to the dynamic religious-faithful institution or relationship between representatives of different faith communities. The second case is encountered when the interest is aimed at setting out together: "Even if they cannot reach shared definitions, through the exchange process, people can become aware of their opinions and broaden mutual understanding" (Sennet 2012: 30). Dialogic conversation does not identify an end, it cultivates a relationship, keeps it alive and is based on being together. In our research it was identified in the spontaneous initiatives originated from below (by the faithful) and in the preservation of the spaces for discussion that the opinion leaders had already built in the times preceding the pandemic.

Thus, physical distancing did not prove to be an impediment for those who had the courage to face the test. Overcoming it to stay together was an incentive

to persevere in building dialogue. Obviously the two different types are not alternatives. Most likely it is the task of the subjects – be they individual faithful or institutions – to find the appropriate combinations to integrate them fruitfully and avoid the risk that the dialogue proceeds by an inertial motion to the point of weakening its creative stimulus.

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