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Singular-Plural Universal. Toward a Philosophy of Interreligious Dialogue

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A single, supposedly general law results from the frenzied expansion of a particular element that loses restraint—if it ever had any—and forgets measure—if it ever had learned it—with the intention of making the rest disappear.

- M. Serres

1. How long have we been talking?

For several decades now, we have been entering a new phase of modernity that is revolutionizing our worldview, the very identities of individuals and groups. Vast shifts in the boundaries between wealth and poverty, differences between inclusion and exclusion, growing inequalities, along with the risks of economic recession, the pressure of migratory flows, devastating humanitarian and health emergencies, climate change, and increasingly devastating wars, are reshaping the planet's structure and introducing scenarios linked to profound and, in many ways, dismaying transformations.

Within these immense processes, which mark the end of the globalization phase, it seems that the present time is marked by a *global disorder* where differences explode without a *logos* being able to *collige fragmenta* and where every unitary representation of the world collapses. In this context, on the religious level—to which I will limit my discussion—the ancient categorical tools of religious peace promoted in the wake of the Wars of Religion (see Christin, 1997), such as the idea of tolerance, of a common denominator between faiths or *minimal belief*, of natural religion—a tool inherited from modernity, which was, in many ways, a troubled *maieutics of the plural*—are foundering in the face of such global disorder without the emergence of a new syntax capable of governing diversity and being

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commensurate with this unprecedented time, in which we know that nothing can be generalized and in which the fault lines of incommensurability between worlds are widening.

In such a context, also the great stabilizations arising from modern thought (Nature/Culture, Science, Technology, Reason, History, Democracy) (see Remotti, 2008, pp. 9-67) are radically questioned. There is no longer an "objective" place—a common nature, a common rationality, a common science, a common democracy—to which we can appeal, speaking on behalf of all or claiming a universally exportable truth. Natural and ahistorical structures do not exist; rather, we know that everything is the product of particular histories and cultures.

In a time when the adjustments and compromises that follow the crises to which modernity had accustomed us are made difficult by the collapse of those false universals, and uncontrollable catastrophes seem threateningly approaching, peace between cultures and religions must be renegotiated on another level: that of a *new universal*. Whatever its form, it is primarily "what needs to be thought." The world is advancing into a terra incognita, within which, perhaps, peace must be conceived starting from *polemos*, from contention, from diversity, as Heraclitus taught at the origins of philosophy.

A tumultuous, anarchic throng of worlds is emerging from their isolation-confinement, none of which wish to be tolerated any longer, but each demands to be recognized *iuxta propria principia*. It is a pluriverse, rhizomatic effervescence of universes of meaning that struggle to be translated and are subject to the constant risk of indifference, in the name of old and new relativistic orthodoxies, or of the will to power, in the name of ever-new conflicts. Such is the time from which we speak, where the indicated either/or demands an *included third*, which will be the culmination of these reflections: conceiving and negotiating a *relational universal without domination or hegemony over the other*.

A geopolitical question par excellence, at this hour on the brink of catastrophe. If it is possible to avoid, or at least delay, or slow down, the clash between worlds or universes—political, religious, cultural—each struggling to assert, like Leibniz's monads, their own drive to exist (see Celada Ballanti [2020], 2022² pp. 131 ff.), this *liberating or catechetical* logic can only take the form of a new universality: non-appropriative, non-colonial, non-devouring of differences, but lacunar, kenotic, plural, relational.

This is a monumental task, to which the following pages aim to contribute in the field of interreligious dialogue, conceived as an aspect of the geopolitical problem identified: first, by reappropriating the original and authentic meaning of the term *dia-logos*, countering its apologetic connotation that has long dominated the history of that peculiar form of dialogue, and then by grasping the term's potential religious purpose.

2. Discordant Harmony: Articulating Distinct Elements

Conceiving a new form of the universal is, in fact, the very vocation of a philosophy of interreligious dialogue. The crisis of our time, which is first and foremost a crisis of dialogue and coexistence, is ultimately, as we have said, a crisis of a *logos* capable of uniting in the respect for distinctions. The task of a philosophy of interreligious dialogue is therefore to develop the idea of a non-totalizing, non-projective universal, which always becomes a device of exclusion, a will to power, and of a dialogue capable of bringing into play the potential of the Greek prefix *dia-*.

Dia-logue, as the interruption of the monologue by the intervention of the other, is always a broken *logos*, implying a gap and a transition. It inhabits that middle ground between relativism and fanaticism, where the *discordant harmony* between faiths dwells, reminding all of them of their common distance from the face of God. Along with reflection on the universal, on the *logos*, any *philosophical* discourse on interreligious dialogue must therefore begin with, or rather move from, the exploration of *dia-*.

Working on the between, on *dia-*, the philosophy of interreligious dialogue presents itself as a *philosophy of limits*, as a *hermeneutics of limits*. In this anti-metaphysical, anti-essentialist, borderless, frayed, shifting in-between or *milieu*, devoid of plausible maps, where diverse elements graze and touch each other, it rediscovers its true *Heimat*. A philosophy of interreligious dialogue corresponds, in this way, to an operation of atopic *detritorialization*, of stripping away the terrain—that, for example, circumscribed by ecclesiastical debates—to open its *res* to a form of knowledge that, uprooting itself from all territory, walks, "poor and naked," between territories: *philosophy*, precisely.

Here, *between places*, in a similar zone unprotected by any knowledge or power, a zone that rather exhibits and confesses its relationship with non-knowledge, the *religious question* that lies at the root of all faiths murmurs and one hears the sigh of that *religious* individual who stands before and after religions (cf. Gauchet [1985], 1992, pp. 293-304; Ferry – Gauchet [2004], 2005; Caracciolo [1971], 1999² [1965] 2000²), one hears the voice of a Transcendence that can speak to every man who comes into this world. The sense of a persistent echo among faiths comes to mind, therefore, in the oscillation of the variety of religious languages, which cannot but carry within itself, as its deepest stigma, *non-knowledge* and *lack*. It will therefore not be without significance, in the spirit of the rehabilitation of the authentic meaning of *dialogue*, against its emptying that has been recorded since the patristic-apologetic origins of interreligious logic, to dwell again on the *dia-* in *dia-logos*, beside which we usually pass hastily and distractedly.

3. "Dia-". Topos atopos

Dia- therefore constitutes, as already mentioned, a *metaxy* of a *hermetic* nature, since it fosters exchanges, transits, grafts, and flows of communication; *hermeneutic*, since it fosters interpretation and translation; *demonic*, since, rather than immobilizing the distinct in the search for a shared *minimum*, a common denominator, or a feeble tolerance, it sets them in motion competitively, importing and exporting differences, contaminating them, subverting them, translating and betraying them, reinventing them, conceiving them as a mutual resource and a reciprocal possibility of inclusion, according to a logic that is *not speculative*, but *plural*, and projects itself onto the other.

A threshold or *limen* that connects and divides, knots and unties, unites and separates, a herm that looks both inside and outside—the antipode of the wall-*limes* that opposes—a porous place of transit, an *Unheimlich*, a *topos atopos*: such is the liminal, double-sided, and disturbing nature of that *dia-*, a veritable seismic zone that unsettles, pierces, fractures, and sows interstices within the *logos*, representing its crisis in its monocentric, theogonic, and dogmatic form, in the sense of that theogony of the *logos* and that dogmatism of the intellect whose critique finds its classic in Kant.

This means that the *dia-logos* does not find its most proper image in the *symbolon*, as the playwright Aristophanes describes it in Plato's *Symposium*. Lack does not resemble the "sole" cut in two, seeking reunification with its other half (Symp. 191d). Nor does dialogue resemble the *tessera hospitalitatis*, whose broken fragment demands to be reunited with the absent part for mutual recognition. The

defectiveness that marks the *dia-* is rather that of Socratic *eros*, structurally halved, by its very nature not destined for completion. It is the incompleteness of that *being-in-between* that is the *daimon*, which incessantly crosses and translates, never filling its comings and goings with a definitively attained perfection. In Socratic *eros* fullness always arises from loss and is constantly nourished by it.

The key to dialogue is not the *symbolic* but the *demonic*: which does not imply a harmony without ripples, a union without cracks, a unity without differences, as would be the case if the eroticism that characterizes *dia-logos* were that of the *symbolon*, of signs destined to reunite without cracks. It is rather a *harmony of distinct elements* that are binded together by arguing and preserving a certain distance, something impossible to share, in a co-belonging that is an indivisible difference between the speakers.

Poros's crossing is not without the memory of Penia, according to the double genealogy of Eros. The god Poros crosses, knows how and where to cross, seeks and finds the way, until the next *a-poria*. His nature is *dia-porein*. Such is dialogue: the unfolding-traveling-crossing that challenges the emergence of *aporia*, of that which blocks the path, and which evokes, more than the reunion of parts, the inexhaustible rotation around an unsaturable and unbridgeable absence. It is a movement that, while generative of itself beyond itself, is never complete. It is all the more generative the more it guards its own incompleteness, its own vocation to the gap, the transit, and the deferral.

4. "Logos". Lacunar, kenotic, and plural universal

How must the *logos* bind so that its connecting does not become homogenization, constraint, or uniformity? Can the *logos* and its universal pass unscathed through that *dia-* that follows it like a murmur at its limits or like a piercing that pierces every closed totality?

Knotted to that *dia-* defined by a *black*, pierced by the lack that the other or the elsewhere open in difference, it is legitimate to ask that that universal in the *logos* contained first of all de-saturate rather than saturate (cf. Jullien [2008], 2010, pp. 65 ff.), open up voids and gaps rather than fill them, allow itself to be invested, pierced, inseminated by that black, by that negative. From this derives a universal that is not monistic but *plural*, not panoramic, totalizing, but *lacunar*, *perspectivist*, not projective but *receptive of differences*. A universal that, having cast aside the material nature of a box or taxonomic container in which to order distinctions, of a completed form awaiting content, it rises from below, emerges from the distinct elements, and submits to the "regime of the multiple and of difference" (Marramao [2003], , p. 255), as if it were already virtually present in them, in a movement that, precisely because it arises from below, is *kenotic* rather than *panoramic*, *hosting-collecting* rather than *prehensile and appropriative*. There is no universal except in the contingent opacity of the singular.

Furthermore, from this emerges a universal that is carved, cut, contracted into particulars, mobile, infinitely differentiated, not already given but constantly to be made. A universal that, far from being a granite monolith, a block without cracks, disintegrates, disseminates, explodes in differences, peeps out in the gaps, nests in the folds, the bottlenecks, the crevices, to expand from there in a *universalizing motion*. Carved in shadows, shaded by black, like the light filtering through a window in a Caravaggio or Vermeer painting, buried in the chthonic darkness that envelops us, the universal is therefore, in this sense, *infinitely universalizable* (cf. Fabris, 1998, pp. 122-141; 2017, pp. 15-30) because, if it lives in the fault lines of differences, if it represents only their never-hypostasized precipitate, it is nothing other than the emergence at the heart of the singular of an infinite periphery, of an uncircumscribable *agora* that makes room in the distinct elements.

Like Karl Jaspers's "das Umgreifende," it is always "für uns ungeschlossen" (Jaspers [1938], 1974, p. 13): it is the "unclosed," that is, the open that drags us, drags our world, toward the beyond. And like Baudelaire's infinity, which is more intensely grasped in the crack between two rocks or through a chink rather than with a panoramic gaze from the top of a mountain (see Baudelaire, 1988, p. 234), similarly the universal is best offered in the narrowness, the crack, the inlet of the particular, unmarked and oblique with respect to any unfolding totality. Oblique rather than panoptic, irregular and plastic rather than marked by the adamantine solidity of logic, always ulcerated by lack, always exposed to the point of catastrophe where the totality shatters and, on its shipwreck, the idea of *perspective* or, in Cusanian terms, of *conjecture* appears. *The universal is the negative theology of the singular*. It appears and disappears in the latter, prohibiting, in its intermittent pulsation, in its excess, any absolutization in the unique, making the part *a part*, and not the *whole*, indeed, the *negation of the whole*, thus disseminating itself in the plural of possibilities. This is why the universal, while *singular*, is also irreducibly *plural*.

But aren't we here also close to Heraclitus's *xynon*, the common that harmonizes the many in the one, that connects opposites, the locus of an invisible harmony—the harmony of the bow and the lyre—manifest only in deferring, in the inexhaustible transcendence of the transition from one term to another? Close, therefore, to that *common law* which, concealing itself in deferring, is ignored by men stuck in an "idios logos", in a private, fragmented, and singularized discourse, and incapable of understanding it? As Massimo Cacciari writes:

What exactly is the Common, τὸ Xynón, if not deferring? In what way is every being common if not in its differing? [...] The *two*, the absolutely distinct, are connected because they *lack* each other's truth, and they recognize in this lack (and therefore in the truth they lack) precisely what constitutes them. Their connection therefore *exists*, insofar as it is always-absent. They are distinct because they could not appear without the other, which is truly such only when it flees-abandons. And in this relationship and through this risk, it is possible to think of their connection—which will never be a given structure, a determined system, and which will nevertheless always exist precisely in the form of distinction, or in its absence (Cacciari [1994], 2003⁴, pp. 148 and 149).

That the plot, the harmony, the *logos* neither appears nor disappears except in the occurrence of the distinct elements it hosts, having neither name nor place except in their conflict-harmonization, is a thought close to the idea, advocated here, of a universal not conceived as a homogenizing vessel in which differences drown, but excavated within them. It is a welcoming, gathering, and unifying cavity, without hegemony. Such a universal, hollowed out in *kenosis* rather than projected onto the other, offering itself *via negationis* rather than as sovereignty, as we said, is the opposite of the panoramic model, which is always a device of appropriation, of exclusion. It could also be described as a *space of unconditionality without hegemony or sovereignty*, or a *regulative or transcendental idea* that subsumes distinct elements within itself, putting that negative to work in its constant subtraction and opening up voids.

Sartre said that we spend our lives filling holes, failing to realize that the possible unity between distinct entities is the opposite of filling them. It lies, that is, in reactivating the absence, the void, the residue, the remainder, the black (cf. Sartre [1943], 1984, pp. 735-736). What binds, the *logos*, is here, as mentioned, the *analogy of a negative theology*; it inhabits the shadow of the negative and the discontinuous, which is both an unbridgeable lack and excess, an unexploded force, a portion of the unexpressed that disquiets and erodes every totality, authoritarian and repressive.

Projecting oneself onto the other, conceiving the other as a mirror of oneself, has an inevitably hegemonic-voluntarist and selective nature, aimed at eliminating foreign bodies, waste, that is, capable of producing exclusions: all the more selective the more totalizing the claim. Projecting a particular point of view onto the whole generates a *false totality* made of camouflaged colonialism, of the will to power, which at best produces the charitable etiquette of *tolerance*, at worst *violence* (see Pasqualotto, 2008, pp. 18 ff.). Kurtz's ravenously gaping mouth in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "as if he wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (Conrad [1899], 2016, p. 94), is a literary cipher of the insatiable soul of the Western universal, of its heart of darkness, precisely, and of the need to *decolonize* it.

The projective-panoramic-specular universal fails precisely where it claims to open everything to visibility, to purge itself of all obscurity: where the whole is laid out in full transparency, panoptically subjected to visual control, subordinated to an empire of glass or screen, where shadow is abolished, there, through the heterogenesis of ends, marginalization, inequality, and waste proliferate, and the unknown of the invisible expands its ambiguous power. Nothing is more mutilated than the totalizing claim. Nothing is more divisive than a universalism without borders, a fallacious response to ethnocentrism. Nothing is more tenebrous—we know this from Horkheimer and Adorno (cf. Horkheimer – Adorno [1947], 1980)—than a regime of perfect visibility, today enhanced by the network of technological devices, giving substance to the dystopias to which twentieth-century literature has accustomed us.

In place of the blindingly totalitarian empire of light, a sun where nothing is ever new, the singular-plural universal opposes the percolating, filtering, intermittent, oblique, erratic and heretical, multi-perspective light, which makes its way through the *black* that surrounds it, envelops it, holding it within itself, as if to protect and remember it. It is a light that, in its flashing without saturating, generates bridges of communication and avenues of dialogue. It generates that chiaroscuro, that irreducible opacity in which each, without renouncing themselves, recognizes the other in their diversity. "The new," Serres writes, "arrives if the sun is restrained" (Serres [1991], 1992, p. 176).

5. The trapdoor and the ungovernable plural

Does the *dia-* only dig horizontally? Does it foster bridges, does it hermetically ignite only multiple transits, exchanges, relationships that connect differences? Or can it also open a trapdoor leading to an *unfounded foundation* that unites all without constraining anyone, binding differences without homogenizing them? Can it, then, have a *religious* value? Do the lines of earthly relationships, of earthly "thous," to use Martin Buber's expression, branch out and intertwine, extend into an eternal "Thou" (cf. Buber [1923], 1993, p. 111), in a Goethean ascent-abyss to the Mothers to rediscover in the sources the shadow of the Source?

Here we are at the final step in the brief journey of thought proposed in these pages. It is within a concrete religious experience that a similar hermeneutic process must be triggered: an arduous, risky process of translation, entrusted to the most fragile thing, *freedom*, but which can lead, as Paul Ricœur finely says in dialogue with Hans Küng, to touching the secret sphere of that

unsaid that is not said in any religion, a kind of mystical foundation of the fundamental that never fully exists in language in a precise manner (Küng – Ricœur [1998], 2015, p. 38).

No common declaration – continues the French philosopher, departing, at least in this, from the theses of the German ecumenical theologian – can be the point of arrival. Rather, that point will be represented by "a common silence on what cannot be said" (Küng – Ricœur [1998], 2015, p. 38). Only by looking at what binds without the logic of domination, only by evoking that unmanageable, *unappropriable foundation*, which religion

cannot control, cannot formulate dogmatically, and which, in a certain way, governs it from afar, from a dark point, from the light of a dark point (Küng – Ricœur [1998], 2015, p. 40),

only in this way is it possible not only to overcome a logic of violence, but also to rediscover, in the *Ungovernable plural* that no one possesses and that subjugates everyone, unity in difference: a *place of the Other* that can never be fully illuminated, an inexhaustible resistance to any grasping, prehensile, philosophical, or theological discourse, a space of impossible revelatory completeness, a source of a plural hermeneutics.

It will then no longer be a prayer of petition, but a prayer of gratitude, from the Christian perspective, a prayer of meditation for Jews in study rooms; for Buddhists, it will be a prayer for enlightenment, modeled on the first enlightened one, Buddha (Küng – Ricœur [1998], 2015, p. 40).

In this internal hermeneutic process, each religion is called, delving into its depths without renouncing itself, to seek its own point of access, its own trapdoor to that profound zone, *in itself untranslatable but the source of all religious translatability*. If doctrines, dogmas, cults, and symbols divide religions to the point of incommensurability, of unshareability, then only the unsaid or silence, as Ricœur states, can bind. That unsaid is like the silent edge where each religious experience touches and caresses the others in the act of withdrawing, in a *withdrawal that includes without invading*, that is authentic proximity, so as to discover itself, in that space unreachable by language, intersected with all. Almost as if that unsaid modulates a *cantus firmus* underlying all faiths but audible only in the language of its own. The unexpected takes on the light of appearance as it is carved into the junctures of history, carved out of the historicity of a religious language called to become, like a Leibnizian monad, a mirror of all others.

It is possible that by walking this *shadowy path*, this nocturnal knowledge that has dismissed the implacable and invasive light of diurnal knowledge, this eccentric path that sinks into an ineffable plural whose law is *Cusan's coincidentia oppositorum* (the maximum conceivable of inclusion, and for Cusanus this law is God), we find ourselves one, beyond the enormous accumulation of religious "things": we encounter each other in that *space of lostness* not fixed in any language, accessible by a multiplicity of paths, in that "fundamental" that "enters into a circle starting from that point where no one dominates" (Küng – Ricœur [1998], 2015, p. 42).

Only by exposing oneself to this frontier zone on the edge of speech, and losing oneself in it, is hospitality possible for the God of the other. Before the dialogical interlocution, the thou is welcomed in the silence of this disorientation. *Hospitality is a shared loss*. Only those who experience their exodus destination as an *ethos*, as a sojourn, can host. It is the wayfarer's loss that becomes recognition, a shared question, a shared mystery. It is the grace of coming from a place, from an obscure contingency, and of passing through it, of crossing borders, because to lose oneself one must be somewhere, have a settlement, a memory, and move toward elsewhere.

Interreligious dialogue, ultimately, where it is *philosophically* conceived, means a similar *transgression* or *preservationist crossing* of faiths—*Aufhebung* or *katargesis*¹ that removes by including and elevating, that deactivates by resignifying—to touch that "fundamental" that the poverty and ashes of our language never fill. And where we are no longer here nor elsewhere, but we find ourselves from different origins in that *middle ground* – the *dia-*, that is, the space *neither* mine *nor* yours but of an *included third* – which, dissolving the wall of identity between friend and enemy, welcomes us as one and distinct.

¹ I can only briefly touch on this crucial theme, to be developed elsewhere, concerning the logic or mechanism that originally governs interreligious dialogue. Regarding *katarghein*, a Pauline term that Luther translates as *aufheben*, a term that is the defining characteristic of Western philosophy, I refer to the suggestions of G. Agamben, *Il tempo che resta. Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani* (*The Time That Remains. A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*), Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2000, pp. 91 ff.

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