

# EXILE AND VIRTUAL SPACE

## The New Frontiers in Interreligious Dialogue

*Benoît Vermander*

IN 1541, FRANCIS XAVIER EMBARKED FOR ASIA. In 1552, he died on the threshold of Canton. The adventure he began was not just one of missionary expansion, but also something more difficult, more *risqué*: dialogue between religions. Almost half a millennium later, the terms of such a dialogue have developed profoundly. And yet a reading of the letters left by Xavier can still evoke something only too familiar in us, something which is a fundamental dynamic in the quest for God. For, as Xavier undertook the risk of an encounter with the human other, he also discovered a God who was revealing Himself as greater, more different, further beyond our reach than Xavier could ever have suspected at the beginning of his journey.<sup>1</sup> Xavier's encounter with the foreignness of Asian beliefs and experience resonates with our experience today of how other people can challenge and subvert our own image of God. No doubt the same happens for them too. Such discoveries remain the basis on which interreligious dialogue becomes the spiritual adventure that it is called to be.

The angle from which I want to sketch this encounter is perhaps a little unusual. Rather than follow in Xavier's footsteps, rather than speak directly about the experiences of interreligious dialogue in the countries he once visited, I want to ask myself about some of the conditions under which this adventure of dialogue is now being pursued. My concern is not with the content of the actual beliefs one encounters, but rather with the framework within which any dialogue takes place. This framework is formed by the relationships—international, technological, economic, political—connecting cultures, nations and religions. How is the encounter between cultures, beliefs

<sup>1</sup> See my 'Le Dieu partagé: sur la route de François Xavier', *Supplément a Vie chrétienne*, 478 (2002).

and religions actually occurring today? What are the means, the channels enabling it to take place? These issues are not often discussed, but they nevertheless affect profoundly what happens in any encounter. To put the point slightly differently: this attempt to ask about what is conditioning and influencing interreligious exchange today is an exercise in investigating the *material conditions* enabling spiritual awareness. It may be that this focus on material conditions is something we need in order to begin to understand how God might be making Himself known today.

### ***From Exile to Exodus***

Perhaps God's self-revelation only ever happens when people are on the move, in exile, beyond their own frontiers. Whenever individuals or groups are drawn out of their ancestral lands, whenever they move beyond their inherited identity and encounter another people, they experience grief, dispossession, conflict, uprooting. And in and through this dislocation, they lose one god and gain another: they are given a space in which God is made known, or rediscovered. It is precisely in their exile that something new happens for them in relation to God. In the interweaving of displacements the tapestry of salvation history comes to be, a tapestry of all the nations being brought together into one.

Can we really say that history as it continues today has nothing new to tell us about the divine reality, the divine project? That would contradict our experience of the One who is always making Himself known as new, as unfinished. There are two features of the migrations and displacements of the contemporary human adventure, it seems to me, that have a specific theological and spiritual significance, one that is influencing interreligious exchanges. The first concerns the space in which this adventure takes place: it is not just a physical space, but also a *virtual space*. The second feature is that these migrations, whether physical or virtual, are connected with the ongoing process of *globalisation*. Virtual reality and globalisation are casting a new light on the divine revelation that takes place whenever people move, flee, migrate or are displaced, and as a result of that movement experience a new encounter.

### ***Migration and Mission***

The displacements which continue to mark our world are of many different kinds, and cannot easily be brought under one heading. There are displacements in virtual reality and displacements that are all too real, all too physical. Some people leave their native land, not because they are responding to a call but because they have no alternative. Some move out of their immediate environment in order to pursue a life that they find attractive. Some want to try their luck elsewhere. Some can no longer put up with the boredom of their routine. Human beings chafe against the constraints of space and time, and in so doing gradually discover a common destiny. The variety of the paths taken by individuals should not blind us to their common feature: what is at stake in these migrations, whether physical or merely in the mind, is always the discovery of potential, of a new reality, of something filled with promise. And as we take this potential on board, God's presence becomes real.

Despite its ambiguities, Abram's departure, Abram's Exodus, is already the virtual presence, the promise, of something else: the reconciliation of Israel and the nations.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, the same virtual presence or promise of reconciliation is at work when Matthew places the Gentile women Rahab and Ruth in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). And in today's world, something similar occurs



<sup>2</sup> See Genesis 12: 10-20. Abram—presumably for fear of the Egyptians' lust or jealousy—tells Sarai to pretend she is his sister. When a plague afflicts Egypt, the truth is discovered. Nevertheless, the episode ends with a kind of reconciliation pointing Abram forward on his way: 'Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him, and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.'

in the figure of the missionary, a person who has chosen to be a migrant. (Though let us remember that missionaries may often be far more comfortable than those who are migrants because they have no choice.) In all these cases, there is a presence of God which becomes manifest only after a departure, an absence, a fleeing or a migration, and which initially comes to us as something virtual, potential, *open*, a means through which the whole body of creation may grow.

The converse of this is a claim about human history. The history of human migration may be a tragic one, and the shorter history of virtual displacement in internet communities may seem merely playful or trivial. Nevertheless these displacements, whether tragic or trivial, represent a potential for the reconfiguration, the reconstruction, the reconciliation of the human. This potential may remain unfulfilled; alternatively it may become the seed from which a great tree grows. Displacement induces a sense of void. But only from such a void can dialogue grow to fruition.

In this displacement, it may well seem that God is absent—even if the journey has been undertaken precisely in order to proclaim God's message. One senses something like this in Francis Xavier. Francis was full of a passion for unity, a passion to draw together the whole universe under one Head, the Christ. But he was always bumping up against differences, differences which could not be eradicated. He doomed every adult who has not been baptized to eternal Hell; he spread this doctrine among his converts; and he struggled interiorly with the need to preach such a law. To begin with, he relied without any interior difficulty on Portuguese colonial power. But then he wrote to the king of Portugal reproaching the king severely for letting people represent him whose only gods were gold, power and sex, and announcing that he was therefore, 'as it were, fleeing to Japan'.<sup>3</sup> He crossed the world's seas and died at the gates of China, which he proposed to evangelize in just a few years in order to prove to the Japanese, in a way worthy of Don Quixote, that Christianity was the superior religion. Though Francis enrolled under the standard of the Cross, he testifies also to the spirit of the Crusades and to the vaulting ambition of the European Renaissance.

<sup>3</sup>Xavier to John III, King of Portugal, 26 January 1549, in *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*, edited and translated by M. Joseph Costelloe (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 237-239.



*St Francis Xavier*

Even from the sixteenth century, the figure of Francis Xavier speaks to us about globalisation and its ambiguities. The impulse to gather the whole earth into one encounters resistance. It clashes with the profound reality of difference, whether cultural, religious, ethnic or economic. We are driven to ask what this 'oneness' is into which God wants to draw us all. Is it really just like a C major chord, excluding all dissonance? Can any gathering that can truly be called human take place except on the basis of equality, respect for individual histories, and pluralism?

Viewed in this light, missionaries today undergo the same kind of interior crucifixion that Francis Xavier did: they are being pulled apart by the conflict between their passion for unity and their sensitivity to dissonance. But today's missionaries can approach this conflict with tools that Francis Xavier did not have, and their context is quite different. Today's missionaries live in a globalised world—and we need to think about what this means for mission today. In previous centuries

almost half of all missionaries died at sea; today's missionaries move from one part of the world to another rubbing shoulders with tourists and business people. The first missionaries put great efforts into drawing maps, into the sheer discovery of the physical and religious spaces which they were entering as pioneers; their successors can make use of libraries, training courses, and interreligious conferences in air-conditioned lecture-halls. There are similar differences between language learning then and now—though it remains the case that for this there is no avoiding a lengthy and patient learning process.

### **Globalisation and Virtuality**

I have just been saying that you cannot understand from a theological point of view the experience of being a missionary today without thinking about globalisation. And earlier I was saying that globalisation and virtuality are connected; they need to be considered together.

It is quite legitimate to claim that, from its beginnings, humanity has been entering into a process of globalisation. Every migration, every contact between one territory and another, everything that has tended to create a single, finite system out of the inhabited world—all this is a form of globalisation. But you can think of globalisation in terms of different time-scales. You can do what I have just done, and stress that globalisation has been happening for many centuries. Or you can see globalisation as organically linked to modernity and the growth of capitalism. Or again, you can see it as emerging from the changes of the last few decades. There is no contradiction between these three ways of looking at the matter; they are simply stressing different factors and reflecting different interests.<sup>4</sup> The crucial point is that the combination of changes occurring in the past decades has led to a qualitative leap: the idea of 'one world' is now something more than a pious aspiration. Within globalisation, one can distinguish three contributing factors: the *exchange of goods*, which has not progressed all that notably over the last decades; the *movement of peoples*, which is increasing significantly; and the *exchange of information* (involving also the transfer of money), which has exploded, and which has become the true driving force behind globalisation in the current sense. What

<sup>4</sup> For a general presentation of globalisation by a sociologist, see Malcolm Waters, *Globalisation* (New York: Routledge, 1995).



makes the difference here is that this globalisation is grounded in the exchange of virtual realities.

We have now reached a point where information is handled through one integrated system, with satellite communications, the internet and the like as its visible channels. Alongside this, a kind of 'planetary consciousness' has arisen, enabling us to see certain problems (the environment, human rights) as properly global. This is one reason why politics between nations has become not so much international relations as transnational relations. The role of nation states is diminishing, and both non-governmental organizations and supra-national structures are becoming increasingly important. All this has a feedback effect on the way we think. It is in the context of such developments that we need to understand interreligious dialogue, both as an activity in its own right, and as an impulse stimulating all the main traditions of belief to re-articulate their foundational convictions.

In short, virtual reality is both the sustaining basis of globalisation and the dynamic mechanism by which the effects of globalisation make themselves felt. *Virtual reality is the language of globalisation.* Conversely, globalisation provides the infrastructure which enables virtual reality to develop according to its own distinctive logic.

### ***A Virtual Religion?***

Virtual reality, then, has become a significant and influential part of our everyday lives. And now that we have started spending significant proportions of our time in virtual environments structured by the internet and by multimedia, these settings have their effects on our social relations and our inner worlds.<sup>5</sup> Of course, virtual reality does not impinge to the same degree on every aspect of our lived existence. But what is striking is the remarkable extent to which it has penetrated into the world of religion, to the point that we can talk of a new phenomenon, the birth of *virtual religion* on the internet, both for believers and for those who are searching.

'Virtual religion' is now becoming well established as an expression, but the realities it denotes are diverse and complex. Let us try to see what it might mean. We can start simply by noting that religious groups have been among the most active in making what they have to offer available on the internet or in other interactive media. Many major religious texts are freely available online. The Churches now present their convictions and their offerings on a wide variety of websites. Then other sites denounce religious groups that they find dangerous, and it reaches the point that the internet becomes a battlefield in wars of religion. In Taiwan there is a museum of world religions that presents the different spiritual traditions through interactive media. Obviously one can find similar phenomena in any sphere of activity. Nevertheless, the desire to share convictions is one of the forces motivating the construction of websites, perhaps even more than economic gain. And this desire is especially powerful once religious groups have entered the field. So it is that the internet has become one of the chief media of religious expression, more effectively and more rapidly than newspapers, the radio or television did when they were in their infancy. Perhaps the only comparable transformation came with the invention of the printing press, which helped to fuel the Protestant Reformation. Might the rise of information technology be the occasion of another Reformation?

Another dimension of this phenomenon is the development of virtual religious communities. There are Churches with an online

<sup>5</sup> Think, for example, of how the use of virtual reality can help us in learning to drive a vehicle or fly an aeroplane.



liturgy; retreats are being given online; there are even virtual shrines being developed on screen. In China today, tombs take up too much land—but Chinese people can now light a lamp for their deceased loved ones on their computer screens, and this serves as a substitute for the ritual on the day for cleansing the tombs in real space. Such a development exemplifies a more general social tendency: communal interaction goes hand in hand with a concern to stay behind one's own screen. One can reveal oneself and at the same time protect oneself; one can interact without endangering one's independence. A new way of living religious affiliation is coming into being which is communal but nevertheless also shaped by the quest for personal identity and for its reinforcement.

Recognising a third aspect of virtual religion takes us across an important threshold. The medium of communication is never insignificant, never itself content-neutral. The channels of virtual reality thus convey a diffused religious message in themselves, or at least favour a certain type of content. The use of the internet is just one instance of the virtual media promoting synthetic belief systems or worlds; other instances include the growing popularity of New Age doctrines, the success of science-fiction films such as *Star Wars*, and the constantly increasing numbers of people playing interactive video games. These last are particularly revealing. They take their enthusiasts into a world beyond the mere game, and thus acquire an almost sacred value. Individuals come to redefine their identities in terms of a virtual reality that thus becomes a higher, transcendent reality. For devotees, it all feels as if a virtual god is working through the virtual reality.

It may not be too much to say that a 'virtual god' is arising in this new virtualised economy, transcending not only the frontiers between the different religions, but also the opposition between theism and atheism. There are plenty of indicators pointing in this direction. Some people use the slogan, 'the internet is God'; others speak in more developed terms of the communications network as a God in the course of emergence. If Spinoza spoke of nature as God, now we have the screen as God. Old-style pantheism has been replaced by a religion of artifice, of autonomous human production. God is no longer the great watchmaker, but rather the watch itself, holding together in one system the times and spaces of the universe.

### ***Towards a Cybertheology***

These ideas do not take us beyond the confines of religious sociology. Can we bring these observations together, to see if there is any real *meaning* in all of this?

Teilhard de Chardin spoke of a *noosphere*, surrounding the biosphere as a kind of thinking envelope. This idea is enough to justify our accepting what some say about his being a prophet of globalisation.<sup>6</sup> If we think of the noosphere as a 'virtual reality', this is not to make it any less real; as Gilles Deleuze repeatedly puts it, 'the virtual possesses a full reality as virtual'. But it is to give Teilhard's idea a new relevance. We need to have the courage to say that virtualisation is in itself a process of emancipation, a process of becoming free from the constraints of space, time and matter. Of course in one sense virtualisation is neutral; it is the content conveyed by the medium which determines whether it is being used well or badly. Nevertheless, the growth of virtual reality impressively fulfils Teilhard's prophetic vision of the earth enveloped in a kind of layer of thought, a sphere 'of the felt union of souls'.<sup>7</sup> But we must modify Teilhard's vision in two ways. Firstly, we need to recognise that in the layer of thought it is not so easy to separate the wheat from the chaff. The 'gleam' from the noosphere also reflects the darker products of human thought, and our shared complicity in evil. Secondly, we need to qualify Teilhard's vision of unification in such a way as to do justice to the reality of dissonance, difference, a harmony that is always postponed. To express the point slightly differently: the music of the thinking spheres is serial music, not the resounding series of major chords often imagined in the past.

This analysis is in no sense intended as a condemnation or lamentation. It is clear that the virtual media provide a valuable resource for understanding religions and the communities that live them. They help believers grow in mutual respect; they facilitate interreligious discussions. Nor do we need to see the recreational side of the internet and the religious knowledge it enables as distractions. Play has always been an important aspect of religious activity; our festivals, feasts and processions remind us of this. That God's own self

<sup>6</sup> See Bernard Sesé, 'Teilhard, prophète de la mondialisation?' *Études*, 396 (2002), 483-494.

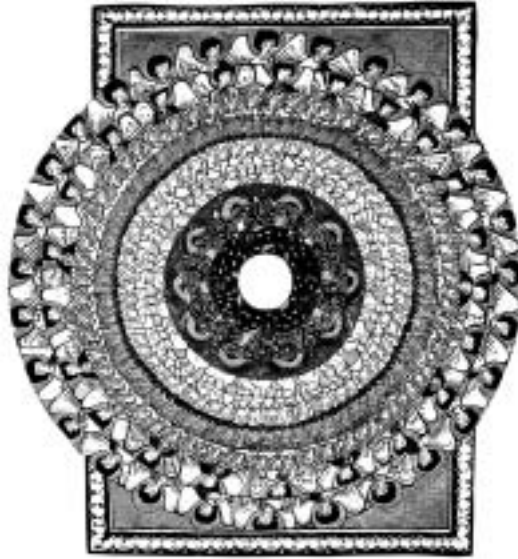
<sup>7</sup> Claude Cuénot, *Nouveau lexique Teilhard de Chardin* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), 137-138.

is at play in the creation, and taking pleasure in it (Proverbs 8:30-31), is an important theological truth. And the imaginative resources deployed in virtual space create a language which can help us speak of things lying beyond logical reasoning's power to express.

At the same time, we need to maintain a firm distinction between the imaginative and the imaginary. I am using the word 'imaginary' here to refer to a mental activity that supplants the reality of the senses, replacing it with something illusory. But an 'imaginative' process is grounded in sensory reality, exploring and enriching its potential. If virtual reality *becomes* religious reality, the situation is a dangerous one. No religion worthy of the name can be simply a collection of fantasy projections, or an opium dulling our sense of everyday life's harsh realities. Rather, religion is a means by which we confront those realities. Religion helps us enter more deeply into the mystery towards which everyday reality is always inviting us. When people talked about religion as an opium in the past, they were making a criticism; these days, it seems that people actually want religion to be a drug. People seem to value religions according to the level of euphoria they induce. With friends like this, religion needs no enemies.

There is no question, therefore, of believers accepting that their beliefs should be confined to the virtual sphere. To say that would deny the ways in which religious beliefs enable people to deal with the challenges of the world in which they live. Believers claim that their convictions are animated by a spirit of truth, not of lies. But this does not mean that believers should reject the rise of virtual reality. The crucial question is what this virtual reality is leading to. So far, the construction of virtual reality is a technological achievement: *now the virtual needs to acquire the status of a work of art—of an art constructed interactively*. Art is not an evasion of reality, but rather a deepening of reality, an interiorisation of reality. Virtual reality can become a modern cathedral if only we can construct it consciously as an *expression of*, rather than a *substitute for*, the aspirations arising from the depths of our memory and imagination. If we can do that, the virtual and the real will not be in competition; rather the virtual will be giving access to a reality deeper than what is merely immediate.

If we reread the parables of the Kingdom (Matthew 13) in the light of these reflections, it is striking how the Kingdom that these parables evoke is in fact speaking to us of something virtual. It is at once already here and still to come. It is not that a project already envisaged



*'The almighty and ineffable God ... created every creature and  
marvellously by his will set it in its place.'*  
Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias, 1.6

just comes true; rather there is a creation which is bringing to fullness something already latently present. The Kingdom is already virtually present to us; but it is through the decisions which that discovery inspires in us that the Kingdom will grow in our world.

In the same way, the Eucharist betokens the virtual reality of the divine presence in all our realities. It promises that all reality is virtually divine, and enacts the transition through which the divine presence is constantly being actualised. Perhaps a reflection on the virtual can enrich our sacramental lives. Sacraments too are concerned with the gap between what is most hidden and what is most visible, between what is present and what is not yet. All this suggests that *the virtual is perhaps the specific way in which God is present to our world*—and that this virtual presence expresses the continual Exodus of a God who is never to be found where one thinks one has pinned Him down. Rather, God situates Himself in the movement through which His

Kingdom is being established. To put the matter in yet another way: *it is the fact that God is always making Himself present that prevents us from ever halting God and laying hold of God.*

### **Exodus, Presence, Dialogue**

The course of our history is less erratic than it looks. We are led forwards and backwards through the deserts into which our Exoduses lead us, and eventually a design emerges. This article began by noting that it is always in flight, in Exodus, in movement, in migration, that God is making Himself known. It has also noted in these migratory movements the historical process by which humanity is coming to an awareness of itself as one reality, as a global entity. We have seen how the figure of the missionary embodies the encounter between a God known in exile and a humanity formed in Exodus. And we have tried to follow how, in this new Exodus—a technological Exodus one might dare to say—God is saying once more that the Kingdom is there to be known and lived in our midst. Just as the human Exodus is now taking a quite new form, so too the knowledge of God which comes from that movement is now quite different.

The universe is always in a process of becoming, and therefore identities and frontiers are always being displaced. It is in the ruptures caused by these displacements that a God is being revealed whose identity cannot be encapsulated. This God is revealing himself as a virtual reality, present in the world while leaving open the range of possibilities for the future. *It is against this background that we have to understand interreligious dialogue today.* Dialogue that is *interreligious* involves the virtual at various levels:

- Interreligious dialogue today is occurring through virtual contacts and being nourished by them, just as religious communities themselves are becoming virtual through the possibilities that the new technologies are allowing and encouraging.
- The content of interreligious encounter is being imperceptibly modified through new spiritual and theological perspectives offered by new ways of accessing reality.
- Finally, and above all, these developments allow us to imagine attaining ultimate reality through the mode of a *virtual*

*presence*, brought about through the new forms of encounter, exchange and solidarity that are arising amid a humanity constantly being reconstituted, constantly becoming.

Interreligious dialogue and the technological transformations currently taking place are two of the major forces influencing cultural and political exchange. What is at stake concerns not only believers but whole nations, whole races. At the same time, however, the process has a deep theological and spiritual significance. The issues may be very different from what Francis Xavier was able to perceive as he made his missionary journeys. But true fidelity to his heritage surely consists in addressing the new realities facing us with the qualities to which Xavier's writings have borne witness right up to our own day: toughness, a taste for adventure, and a confidence in the God of exile and Exodus.

**Benoît Vermander SJ** entered the Society of Jesus in 1988, and has lived in Taiwan since 1992. He was ordained priest in 1996, and since then has been director of the Ricci Institute in Taipei. He is also the founding editor of *Renlai*, the Chinese Jesuits' cultural journal.