

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Foundations and Objections
within the Discourse on Human Dignity

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Pier Cesare Bori

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edited by

Alberto Melloni and Riccardo Saccenti

DINO BUZZETTI

PIER CESARE BORI

From 1 November 1970 to 31 October 2007, Pier Cesare Bori has been teaching as a member of the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Bologna, where he still delivers occasional lectures, as an honorary member, to the courses of *Moral Philosophy* and *Human Rights*.

Pier Cesare Bori completed his studies in law at the Catholic University in Milan and in theology and biblical sciences at the Gregorian University in Rome. From the beginning of his teaching activity as a professor in the *History of Theology* until 1980, he carried on research work as a fellow of the Istituto per le Scienze Religiose in Bologna. His research interests focused in this period on the history of exegesis and in 1974 he spent four months in Jerusalem, at the Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Studies, Tantur, in charge of a seminar on ancient Christian anti-Judaism. The seminar dealt with the exegesis of *Exodus* 32 and the episode of the adoration of the golden calf. Further studies on these matters led eventually to the publication of the monograph *Il vitello d'oro: Le radici della controversia anti giudaica* (Boringhieri, Torino 1983), also translated into English (*The Golden Calf and the Origins of the anti-Jewish Controversy*, Scholars Press, Atlanta GA 1990).

An historical-critical approach is present also in the preparatory studies to the Italian translation of Freud's *Moses* (*L'uomo Mosè e la religione monoteistica*, Boringhieri, Torino 1977), but by the end of the Seventies new interests emerge, directed towards the reform movements of the Russian church on the one hand, and human rights issues on the other. As to the former research motive, during the preparation of the anthological collection, co-edited with Paolo Bettiolo, *Movimenti religiosi in Russia prima della rivoluzione* (Queriniana, Brescia 1978), his attention moves on to Tolstoj as a religious philosopher. From now on,

the relationship between philosophical wisdom and religious beliefs becomes one of the inspiring motives of Bori's research and teaching.

Just as Tolstoj's quest for truth and wisdom cannot be severed from his moral allegiance and aspirations, so is the case with Bori's reflection on the foundations of human rights, that cannot be kept apart from real action and engagement in promoting education (*paideia*) and in serving one's own community (*polis*): «to understand, one needs to do» (Bori, *Incipit*, 206). In this respect, it is worth mentioning the organisation, in collaboration with the Italian Section of Amnesty International, of two international conferences on *The Death Penalty in the World* (1982) and *Intolerance* (1984), and of four *Weeks of Training on Human Rights* (1987-90). Most of this activity has been carried on by Bori during his office as chair of the Department of History in Bologna (1984-88).

If the discussion on human rights cannot be confined within the boundaries of purely ethical or juridical issues, but involves, in Bori's opinion, a discernment of deeper religious motivations and inspiration, conversely, the exegetical practice so far applied to religious texts widens its scope to the consideration of Tolstoj's project of a "reading cycle" of sapiential literary works. In his essay *Un'idea di lettura* (1989), and later in his book *L'altro Tolstoj* (Il Mulino, Bologna 1995), Bori sees Tolstoj's reading ideal as a form of secularised *lectio divina*.

Since 1984 Bori has been co-editor, with Mauro Pesce, of the «Annali di storia dell'esegesi», a journal devoted to the history of hermeneutics and biblical exegesis. His historical-critical approach to exegesis had already moved on to the conviction that «Scripture grows with its readers» and to the full appreciation of «spiritual reading», as an act of interpretation so much inspired by its animating spirit as is the interpreted text itself (*Incipit*, 49, 146). It is this interest in interpretation and the broadening of historical-critical exegesis into wide-ranging hermeneutics that leads, in the same years, to the publication of *L'interpretazione infinita: L'ermeneutica cristiana antica e le sue trasformazioni* (Il Mulino, Bologna 1987), also translated into French (*L'interprétation infinie: L'herméneutique chrétienne ancienne et ses transformations*, Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1991).

The understanding of human rights as dependent on religious inspiration and the conceiving of a secularised spiritual reading of sapiential literature both converge towards what develops – as it is apparent in the theme of this book – into a form of anthropological reflection that insists on a notion of human nature basically characterised by its essential religious dimension. In the following years, philosophy and religion, wisdom and prophecy, keep clinging firmly together in Bori's intellectual and practical concerns. This newly emerging orientation shows itself in the assumption, from 1987 onwards, of the chair of *Moral Philosophy*, that at the beginning, and up to 1993, was still taught in conjunction with the *History of Theology*.

A persistent attitude in Bori's reflection is a positive disposition to natural reality, existence and life. The attainment of wisdom is open to every man by virtue of their own natural endowment and independent of any particular cultural tradition. A basic anthropological optimism inspires the conviction that a transcultural ethical consensus can thus be reached across cultural diversity, as it is argued in *Per un consenso etico tra culture: Tesi per una lettura secolare delle scritture ebraico-cristiane* (Marietti, Genova 1991), also translated into English (*From Hermeneutics to Ethical Consensus Among Cultures*, Scholars Press, Atlanta GA 1994). In the same years, from 1993 to 1995, Bori held office as chairman of the Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi su Ebraismo e Cristianesimo (now Centro Interdipartimentale di Scienze delle Religioni) of the University of Bologna. In 1994, 1995, 1996, and 1997, as a visiting professor, he gave lectures on *Comparative Ethics* at Brown University, the University of Oregon, the University of Tunis, and Meiji Gakuin University in Tokyo. In 1998 Bori started a new and still ongoing teaching activity at the Dozza prison in Bologna, where he has since been delivering lectures on *Moral Philosophy* especially to North-African (Maghreb) Arab-speaking detainees.

It is a similar deep anthropological motivation that prompts further enquiries into religious humanism. One and the same absolute principle of spiritual life can be reached through a plurality of pathways across different cultural and religious traditions. This jointly anthropological and religious insight is assumed as his basic hermeneutical principle for the study of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, that subsequently leads to the publication of the book *Pluralità delle vie*:

Alle origini del Discorso sulla dignità umana di Pico della Mirandola (Feltrinelli, Milano 2000).

The realisation that a profound understanding of the plurality of ways to a wholesome religious insight can be achieved only through active practical engagement and a growing dissatisfaction with the shallow «ritualisation» of the evangelic *bona annuntiatio* (*Incipit*, 194) leads to the study of George Fox's *Journal*, as well as other Quaker texts and literature, and to the organisation and practice of silent worship meetings. The publication of several papers on Quakerism and of the anthological collection, co-edited with Massimo Lollini, *La società degli amici: il pensiero dei quaccheri* (Linea d'ombra, Milano 1993) is closely related to this direct practice to achieve a full awareness of the plurality of ways to religious experience.

The recognition of a «plurality of pathways to the Absolute» (*Incipit*, 213), as it shows itself in the spiritual reading of secular wisdom literature, side by side with a proper grasping of a variety of religious texts, leads to the assumption of a common transcultural and universal «base» (183) for religious awareness and sapiential understanding. The perceptive discernment and active construction of an «intercultural pathway (*methodos*)» directs thus towards the «discovery of an almost unspeakable centre, not outside, but inside us» (241); in Bori's most recent views, it is the realisation of such a «mystical» and «objective presupposition of an ethical and unitary outlook of the world» that can lay the foundations for our «sense of belonging» and «mutual interdependence» (205).

The inspiring motives of many of Bori's recent publications, now collected in *Universalismo come pluralità delle vie* (Marietti 1820, Genova-Milano 2004), and the urging impulse of his latter teaching activity, as organiser and chair (from 2002 to 2005) of an undergraduate curriculum in *Cultures and Human Rights* at the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Bologna, can be easily recognised in these later convictions, that have led also to the conception and planning of the present book.