

In *Interreligious Dialogue*, Christoffer Grundmann has assembled a truly extraordinary collection of writings on interreligious dialogue by some of its most important and respected thinkers and practitioners. The introduction speaks of these as “remarkable essays.” This is an understatement. What a wonderful text for college students and theology students, as well!

—Stephen Bevans, SVD
Catholic Theological Union, Chicago

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Interreligious Dialogue

An Anthology of Voices
Bridging Cultural and Religious Divides

Christoffer H. Grundmann


ANSELM
ACADEMIC

*To the younger generations
to which
Katharina-Chitra-Kirubai,
Gabriele-Shakti-Shantini
and
Friederike-Cornelia
with their children belong*

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Editor's Preface

Christoffer H. Grundmann, editor

Compiling an anthology requires a conscious decision of what to include and what to leave out based on a critical rationale. The rationale behind the selection of texts in this volume is to present accessible, seminal original contributions on the topic of interreligious dialogue for individual reading as well as for in-depth study in classes and elsewhere. No anthology is either fully representative or without shortcomings.

Absent from this text are voices about interreligious dialogue from people of indigenous religions, as noted by some of our peer reviewers. Yet, to the editor's knowledge, such voices—if they are recorded at all—are not well documented and available in English. What we have are descriptions of indigenous religions by cultural anthropologists and scholars of comparative religions. Likewise this anthology lacks texts addressing the need for interreligious dialogue addressed to youth from within the Muslim, the Hindu, and the Buddhist traditions of faith. No doubt there are other lacunae in this text as well, like the absence of explicitly female voices. To realize these limitations points to the need for further inquiry, research, and documentation, as well as to supplement use of this text with other resources, other voices, to fill the inevitable gaps and also to raise the profile of all those involved in contributing to this critical conversation.

Although the editor, who is Christian, has taken pains to include as many diverse contributions to interreligious dialogue as possible, readers will notice a disproportionate number of chapters written by Christians, as well as the absence of documentation about “failed” dialogues. This is owed to the fact that (a) to date, most of the written documentation on interreligious dialogue is done by Christians, and (b) failed dialogue is no longer dialogue and thus no longer serves the aim of this text, which is to provide exemplars of successful dialogue and principles of dialogue. It is true that individuals and groups may cease or even shun dialogue, but to do so means to refuse human communication and foster a potentially dangerous situation because people, then, are bereft of the opportunity to converse, including about their conflicts.

On a final note I would like to mention that all contributions have been reprinted with proper permission and with utmost faithfulness to the content and style of the respective authors. In some few instances, this may go against more contemporary sensibilities and conventions, such as to use inclusive language with respect to gender. Finally, explanation is sometimes provided for important technical terms that may be unfamiliar to the nonexpert. In such cases, the added information is enclosed in square brackets [] or in a footnote, if it is a longer one.



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The human future of the earth depends not only upon political, economic, or ecological decisions. In an age marked by global migration and networking, the peaceful living togetherness of people also depends critically on mutual understanding of differences rooted in distinct religious identities, an understanding that interreligious dialogue attempts to facilitate.

Introduction

Interreligious Dialogue and Peace in the Age of Globalization

Christoffer H. Grundmann

Globalization and Interreligious Dialogue

We live in a globalized world. To say this is to express awareness of the fact that we live in a highly interdependent environment of global dimensions presenting unique challenges. These challenges not only affect economies and ecology, they also affect politics, culture, and religion alike. Living in a country that is heavily reliant in its functioning and well-being on the give-and-take with other nations with distinct cultures, religions, and mores¹ necessitates competence in intercultural and interreligious understanding so as to avoid the dreaded “clash of civilizations.”² While many just enjoy the obvious advantages of globalization—lower prices, more choices, broader variety, greater freedom of movement and contacts—others fear the idiosyncrasies of civilizations not their own. Whereas globe trekkers seek the exotic of foreign cultures—the strange languages spoken, the taste and smell of unaccustomed food, the indigenous ways of dress and attire—those less curious tend to be scared by and suspicious of anything unfamiliar that they do not understand. Such fear and suspicion, at its most extreme, can lead to shocking violence, as occurred in the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks when Islamist terrorists declared “war” on Western society, the United States in particular.³

Investigating the 9/11 attacks and advising on how best to prevent such assaults in the future, the official report concluded that “there is no common

1. *Culture* here refers to the general perception of lived distinctiveness and identity; *religion* references spiritual and philosophical-theological beliefs and practices, and *mores* refers to ethical standards.

2. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

3. See Osama Bin Laden, *Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places* at www.terrorismfiles.org/individuals/declaration_of_jihad1.html.

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ground—not even respect for life—on which to begin a dialogue” with the ideology driving such terrorists; for this reason, according to the report, “it can only be destroyed or utterly isolated.”⁴ As understandable as such reaction is in light of the atrocities committed, the consequences drawn and the recommendations given are anything but helpful in furthering mutual understanding of differences in order to prevent such violence in the future. The suggestions made just perpetuate the vicious circle of hate and revenge—they don’t break it. In today’s globalized world, retaliation and noncommunication with those determined to inflict harm pose serious problems that threaten to destroy the fragile equilibrium of power that warrants the functioning of globalization in the first place.

Efficiently stopping terrorist activities is not enough; a robust culture of mutual understanding and trust across cultural and religious divides must be fostered as well. Religious diversity particularly must be addressed, as religion is at the very core of culture and civilization. Therefore, promotion of dialogue at all levels of society among people of different faith traditions and cultures is of prime importance for keeping peace. However, to say so requires some clarification of the meaning attached to the principal terms used in this argument: *religion* and *dialogue*.

What Is Religion?

A U.S. Religious Landscape Survey conducted in 2008 concluded that “Americans love to shop, even for religion. More than 40 percent of U.S. adults have changed their faith since childhood. . . . For America’s faithful, it’s a buyer’s market.”⁵

While religious diversity has existed from the beginnings of human culture, the market perspective on religion—not only in the United States, but in Western society in general—is a comparatively new phenomenon, the emergence of which is an expression of a drastic change in the understanding of religion itself. People in the Western world tend to perceive religion as an exclusively private affair and as a matter of choice, only thereby turning a blind eye to the fact that religion, actually, is at the core of culture.

Take food, for instance. While people today delight in the breadth of international cuisine available nearly everywhere—Indian, Chinese, Thai, Middle Eastern, Ethiopian, Mexican, Indonesian, Japanese—few realize that the fare typical of each is often determined by religious dietary regulations. These regulations concern not only the style and manner of preparing food (*kosher* in Judaism; *halal* in Islam; *Shiva*—undefiled by outcasts—in Indian religions) but also

4. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, authorized ed. (New York: Norton, 2004), 362.

5. Jackson Dykman, “The Marketplace of Faith,” *Time*, Feb. 29, 2008, 41. The URL for the survey is www.pewforum.org/2008/02/01/u-s-religious-landscape-survey-religious-affiliation/.

the diet itself. One will not find meats of “unclean animals” on the menu of Jewish and Muslim restaurants, which in practical terms means pork. For orthodox Hindus, abstinence from beef (and for Hindus of the highest castes who disavow meat consumption in principle, strict vegetarianism, called “Shiva food”) is obligatory. Likewise, orthodox Islam and Buddhism decree abstinence from fermented drink, as do the Sikhs, who also relinquish any use of drugs or narcotics, including cigarettes. In “shamanistic” religions, in contrast, intoxicating drink is essential to the proper celebration of religious rites, as in the Mesoamerican Peyote cult or the classic Vedic *Soma* sacrifice.⁶

Alongside differences in food, religious directions often rule the dress code. For instance, most Muslim women are advised to wear the *hijab*, a headscarf or veil, while some are expected to disguise their entire body with a *burka*.⁷ A male Sikh must cover his head with a turban; Hindus and Muslims also wear turbans, as do Arabs and other desert-dwellers. The color of the gowns of Buddhist monks is a religious statement, too; its reddish yellow or dark red symbolizes the setting sun as an indication of forsaking the world.⁸

Likewise, ways of hallowing time and celebrating festivals reflect the exclusivity and distinctiveness of cultures. No two calendars are alike—secular or religious. In the United States, citizens annually commemorate the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving, recalling events central to the freedom and opportunity for which the United States is known around the world. Religious calendars,

6. Vol. 63.3 (1995) of *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* is a thematic issue on the topic of food and religion; see also Daniel Sack, *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) and Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). For the Shamanistic religions see Åke Hulkrantz, *Shamanistic Healing and Ritual Drama* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997), esp. pp. 142–146, and R. Gordon Wasson, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971). For the Hindu *Soma* sacrifice see the voluminous study by Frits Stall, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1983).

7. The word *hijab* comes from the Arabic for “veil” and is used to describe the headscarves worn by Muslim women. These scarves, regarded by many Muslims as a symbol of both religion and womanhood, come in a myriad of styles and colors. The *niqab* is a veil for the face that leaves the area around the eyes clear. However, it may be worn with a separate eye veil. It is worn with an accompanying headscarf. The *burka* is the most concealing of all Islamic veils. It covers the entire face and body, leaving just a mesh screen to see through. The *al-amira* is a two-piece veil. It consists of a close-fitting cap, usually made from cotton or polyester, and an accompanying tube-like scarf. The *shayla* is a long, rectangular scarf popular in the Gulf region. It is wrapped around the head and tucked or pinned in place at the shoulders. The *khimar* is a long, cape-like veil that hangs down to just above the waist. It covers the hair, neck, and shoulders completely, but leaves the face clear. The *chador*, worn by many Iranian women when outside the house, is a full-body cloak. It is often accompanied by a smaller headscarf underneath. The type most commonly worn in the West is a square scarf that covers the head and neck but leaves the face clear. There have been attempts to ban both the *niqab* and *burka* in some European countries, notably France.

8. On the issue of religious dress codes see Mary M. Crain, “Dress and the Body,” *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 3 (2000): 790–791.

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however, go back much further in time and revolve around quite different events. Jews who live by a calendar based on the lunar cycle count the years from the very beginning of time, which in practical terms means that the year 2015 CE, according to Jewish counting, is year 5775/76 since the creation of the world. The distinctive mark for Christians is the Resurrection of the crucified Christ at Easter. It is from Easter that all the other festivals and liturgical days are set. Not only that, the actual beginning of the new time, according to Christian belief, sets in with God's Incarnation in the birth of Jesus Christ, according to which I am composing this introduction in the year 2015 AD (*Anno Domini*, the 2015th "Year of the Lord," with AD being the preferred terminology before CE or Common Era gained preference in most quarters). For Muslims the most decisive event is the foundation of the Islamic community, the *Umma*, which happened when Mohammed and his first followers left Mecca to take refuge in Medina (Hijra) in 622 CE; counting 622 CE as the beginning of a new time for Muslims (who, like Jews, observe a lunar calendar), 2015 will be 1436/37. It is from events like these that each religion determines its particular rhythm of time, hallowing certain periods as festive while declaring others as times of public mourning and fasting, and setting the days for worship and prayer.

Further, religious perceptions also shape pivotal events in the lives of individuals, families, and communities. Consider the Shabbat celebration of Jews, Sunday worship by Christians, and Friday prayers for Muslims, or consider Christmas in Christian celebration, the *Chanukah* and *Purim* festivals in Jewish observance, or the *Eid al-Adha'* (the Feast of Sacrifice) in Islam. Religious directions come most powerfully to the fore in critical life events such as giving birth, celebrating a wedding, or handling dying, death, and burial through ritual observance. Yet, these rituals differ distinctively from culture to culture, a feature that becomes most obvious in funerals. While Muslims never cremate their dead, Hindus do, and the Parsi (the Indian branch of Zoroastrianism) place the cadavers in so-called "Towers of Silence" for vultures to feed on, a powerful reminder not just of their nomadic past, but also of the circle of life.

The most obvious element in which religions differ is the language of their Holy Scriptures, at least as far as the so-called world religions are concerned. Even though most people—save the trained experts—are unable to read the scriptures of their own religious tradition in the language of their original composition, these texts, nonetheless, bring about a perceivable unity and cultural identity in that they are regularly used in ritual formulas and prayers as parts of all significant religious ceremonies. In many religious traditions, readers recite passages of Holy Scriptures as appointed readings in worship or on occasion of private ceremonies. By their constant repetition at critical junctures in life, these texts create an impression and identity from the earliest days of childhood. Equally important, these texts contribute to the formation of a collective memory.

Rabbi Simon Philip de Vries (1870–1944) once described this all-inclusive aspect of religion with regard to Judaism:

Judaism can be recognized outwardly by its peculiar features, unfamiliar and conspicuous to a non-Jew. It stands out by its Sabbath, its festivals, its worship, its dietary regulations, its ritual and ceremonies. Naturally . . . above all, there is its concept of God and its core religious thought, the most important of which is contained in the word, in the concept of monotheism. . . . As a people of worship . . . it [Judaism] has, like every other religion, its worldview, and a valid order of life for its adherents. To be sure, in actuality it doesn't *have* a worldview—because it *is* a worldview. In it everything is contained as a unity. It comprehends creation and life as a *unit*, and indeed, in the absolute and widest sense. This worldview is a culture of its own, in which everything belonging to life, as touching and pertaining to life, has its greater or smaller share . . . in this unity. From this point of view everything is judged and considered. Its object is humanity and the human person. It is exactly as with the state and its members as it is with society in general and the life of individuals in interpersonal, social relationships. Therefore the political order is not excluded. There is also room here for criminal justice and civil jurisdiction. Likewise the home, the synagogue, and ritual belong to this unity.⁹

Indeed, religion is at the core of culture. At the heart of the diverse aspects comprising a culture is a distinct, noninterchangeable worldview communicated by well-established, holy tradition and enacted again and again in ceremonies and rituals.

Religion as Lived Relationship Toward an Ultimate

Religion and interreligious dialogue deal with worldviews and their impact on communal as well as individual life. In secularized Western culture, no longer does this necessarily indicate *established* religion, but rather a more general attitude toward life that focuses on personal satisfaction. This is particularly true of more affluent, individualistic societies.

People may deny belief in anything “religious,” but they cannot deny the witness of their lifestyle and life choices. A profoundly secular lifestyle bears witness to the core values of the individual practicing it. Deny it or not, the way

9. S. Ph. de Vries, *Joodsche riten en symbolen*, 8th ed. (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1996). The quoted text is rendered from the German edition *Jüdische Riten und Symbole* (Wiesbaden: Fourier Verlag, 1982), 314f; original emphasis.

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one lives—as atheist, nonspiritual pragmatist, consciously religious, observant and pious, and so on—witnesses what one holds dear and where one’s treasure lies. In other words, how we live tells the religious dimension of our lives, provided “religion” is understood as lived relationship toward an Ultimate—whatever that Ultimate may be. That people lost sight of this religious dimension of life and of religion’s comprehensive impact on the shaping of a common culture is—at least in part—the result of an extended discourse on “religion” in Western intellectual history that established “religion” as a subject matter.¹⁰

In general, philosophers conceding “religion” to have immense practical value for social cohesion and political order for the good or the bad distorted religion by assuming that there does exist something like a “natural religion” with an “idea of God” or a “higher being” at its core. Yet, “religion” is not just a mental construct of abstract concepts. Concepts do not do justice to the vibrant vitality of religions actually lived. Concepts are void of colorful detail. They single out certain aspects of “religions” only, distill these to the taste of intellectual clarity and declare what is left to be the essence of “religion.” However, “religion” never exists in the singular. “Religion” exists—and always did exist—in a colorful plurality of different lived “religions.” These vary to such a degree that one wonders if the single, general term *religion*, under which to subsume these manifold cultural phenomena, is appropriate at all.

For instance, the concept of God or of gods, respectively, plays a significant role only for a particular group of religions, the so-called theistic religions such as the religion of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, or today’s Shivaism and Vishnuism in India. Monotheistic religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam represent a subgroup of this type of religions. But there are also nontheistic religions like Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, besides innumerable religious practices in Shamanism and divination, not tied to the worship of deities at all.

What complicates matters further is that until the eighteenth century, with the beginning of the Enlightenment, an articulated concept of religion as such did not exist and was not a matter of concern. Even today, many traditions do not self-describe using the term “religion.” The Romans used “religion” (*religio*) as just one term among several others—*lex*, *pietas*, *fides*, *cultus*, *secta*—to designate particular acts of worship, devotion, and religious practice. The Indian religions commonly subsumed under the term “Hinduism” such as Shivaism, Vishnuism, and Shaktism, for instance, speak of *dhārma* instead, a Sanskrit noun which above all means “order” as “cosmic law.” *Dhārma* understood as

10. For a qualified survey on the topic see E. Feil “The Problem of Defining and Demarcating Religion,” in *On the Concept of Religion*, eds. E. Feil, B. McNeil (Atlanta, GA: Scholar Press, 1999), 1–35, and especially Feil’s monumental four-volume study *Religio: Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs* [Religion: History of Modern Concept] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986–2007).

“cosmic order” or “cosmic law” is, evidently, “eternal law,” or as Hindus would say *sanātana dhārma*. But the term *dhārma* also oscillates among many other meanings like “duty,” “caste duty,” “legal system,” “offering,” “justice,” “essence,” and “virtue.”¹¹ In Buddhism, on the other hand, the same concept, *dhārma*, which in Pali (the language of Buddhist holy texts) is *dhamma*, signifies the teaching of the Buddha. Interestingly though, Buddhism not only lacks a concept of religion, it actually shows no interest in one. Buddhism is mainly concerned with the perception and realization of the true essence of world and life as revealed in the *dhamma* of the Buddha. However, since the Buddha likened his teaching to a vehicle and specifically a raft (translated from the Sanskrit *yana*), “vehicle” or “raft” may be considered to function as the Buddhist equivalent to the idiom “religion.” But even this meaning covers only a fraction of what lived religion actually implies, specifically the concrete, empirical, experiential aspects of the lived relationship toward an Ultimate. Just what, then, does one actually converse and communicate about in interreligious dialogue with Buddhists?

In Islam there is no synonym for “religion” either. The two Arabic terms used by Muslims to signify the entirety of religious expressions of life are *milla* and *din*. These terms, however, pose problems in various respects, because both are loanwords from other languages. While *milla* stems from Aramaic (a Semitic language) and, as a rule, signifies the actual “religious community” in a certain place, the more frequently used *din* is of Persian origin, the etymology of which cannot be established beyond doubt. The issue is whether *din* derives from *dayn* (meaning “guilt” or “credit”) or from *dana li* (meaning “to submit”). Thus *din* can take on entirely different overtones, such as “custom,” “directive,” “reprisal,” “judgment,” “obedience,” “submission,” or “tradition.” In theological discourse among the *Ulama* (the Muslim theologians), *din*, as a rule, signifies the divine institution that hands down the faith and doctrines while at the same time points the faithful to good works. Thus, closely observing *din* leads to salvation in this world and the next. Therefore, *din* might denote religion in its broadest sense.¹²

For Judaism the term *berith*, which means “covenant” or “contract,” serves as the central concept, one most likely considered the equivalent of religion. But the etymology of this term is also not clear. Quite specifically, *berith* means, “the making of a covenant sealed by an offering,” like the one on Mount Sinai, through which, by the power of God’s election, Israel became the “people of the covenant,” the “people of God.” But in a broader sense *berith* signifies a somewhat generic “covenant” as well, a “regulation,” an “agreement,” a “solemn

11. See Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1899; repr., New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1971), 510–511, s.v. “*dhārma*.”

12. See *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 431ff.

pledge,” denoting, more specifically, the “right leading” of people by means of the commandments and the “law.”¹³

Therefore, when speaking of interreligious dialogue one must remain conscious of the intellectual—even ideological—construct this term presents. More than that, one has to acknowledge that the idiom “religion” not only fails to correspond to lived reality but actually distorts it. Practically speaking, Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists, to name just a few, might be suspicious if asked to participate in a substantive conversation about “religion,” because this is a concept rooted in a culture not theirs. Yet, to recognize this does not imply that pursuing interreligious dialogue is in vain and doomed to fail; this recognition, rather, points to some of the more demanding implicit challenges in the venture. The papers and articles presented in this anthology amply document those challenges and how they can be met and overcome successfully.

What Is Dialogue?

The distinctive means by which human beings communicate with each other is by words, and especially spoken words. People speak to one another to share feelings, information, and thoughts. They converse to socialize, to learn, to gain understanding, and to argue. As long as people are in conversation with one another there is a real chance of avoiding violence. What a hopeful sign, when news breaks that two sides to a bitter conflict have returned to the negotiating table, like Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir, and Israelis and Palestinians in the Near East. As long as those who are suspicious of and hostile to one another still talk, there is hope for maintaining peace, which is so essential for life to thrive. In the words of Jewish philosopher, translator, and journalist Martin Buber (1878–1965):

In a genuine dialogue each of the partners, even when he stands in opposition to the other, heeds, affirms, and confirms his opponent as an existing other. Only so can conflict certainly not be eliminated from the world, but be humanely arbitrated and led towards its overcoming.¹⁴

Recognizing this, however, should not lead to an attitude that styles dialogue as a means to look for the least common denominator among people holding conflicting worldviews. Those who peddle their worldview in an

13. See G. Quell, “The OT term בְּרִית,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, transl. and ed. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 106–124; A. J. Avery-Peck, “Covenant,” in *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*, ed. J. Neusner, A. J. Avery-Peck, W. S. Green, vol. 1 (New York: Continuum, 1999), 136–151.

14. Martin Buber, “Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities of Peace,” in Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way—Collected Essays*, transl. and ed. by M. Friedman (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 238.

exhibitionist manner, even at the cost of selling their own cultural-religious tradition at bargain prices, cut themselves off from their roots and lose their grounding. However sensitive and original the gestures toward commitment to an ideologically styled religious pluralism under these circumstances, such gestures are hardly other than systematic enticements to forfeit any orientation grounded in a binding tradition. This attitude will gain little if any appreciation from those who are seriously concerned about dialogue and who don't seek consensus but understanding.

It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish dialogue from other ways in which people are in conversation with one another. Dialogue is more than just exchanging information on issues or problems. Of course, exchange of information is always part of what it means to be in dialogue, but that certainly is not distinctive of dialogue. Even less is dialogue equivalent to a negotiation in which opposing parties try to reconcile their conflicting interests in an attempt to reach a compromise acceptable on all sides. As mandated representatives of disagreeing parties, negotiating partners have to be concerned with the preservation of interests—an attitude that would be quite deadly for any dialogue, especially if it were interreligious. Dialogue as genuine conversation among humans is not concerned about domination and power. Dialogue, rather, has everything to do with gaining insights and growing in understanding while being in conversation, insights which cannot be gained and do not come about otherwise, neither by debate nor by discussion. In terms of function, dialogue resembles roundtable talks, a well-established means of conflict resolution since the beginning of the twentieth century. The aim is to resolve problems not through confrontation—that is why one sits at a round table—but in agreement. Still, dialogue does not exhaust itself in mere problem solving.

According to the Greek root of the term, dialogue means “to be in conversation.” Thus, dialogue is a predominantly language-based interpersonal interaction that recognizes the counterpart not as an impersonal object but as an autonomous individual other. Dialogue may entail honest conversation about contentious questions, in the process bringing about a better understanding of existing tensions and differences. This is the prime goal of dialoguing—not solving problems, even though problems may well get solved once existing differences are properly understood. Hence, to refuse dialogue is a signal of isolation and growing estrangement from one another which, at its extreme, may lead to violence, such as the attacks of 9/11/2001. Dialogue, interreligious dialogue in particular, is indeed vital for human survival.

As interpersonal conversation, dialogue is not immune from abuse, of course. Speaking and talking back, asking questions and giving answers are essentially successions of speech-acts. Since dialogue is essentially a speech-event, its success depends directly on the way individuals use language, as well as on the speakers' intentions and authenticity. Thus participants in dialogue ought

to be mindful of factual adequacy—the adequacy of what they articulate in relation to perceived reality, as well as congruence between what they are saying and what they are, in fact, thinking or intending. Success depends on whether their speaking is truthful and sincere. One can speak eloquently, all the while aiming to disguise actual intentions, in order to leave conversation partners in the dark, or to render them compliant by subtle manipulation. For speaking is not everything there is to dialogue. Merely speaking with others is by no means in and of itself pursuing dialogue; actually, it may be just a staging of monologues intended to accomplish something quite different from the goal of dialoguing. Any such kind of inauthentic speech is a subtle form of despotism since its intention is to manipulate others, not to communicate in order to come to true understanding. Such exploitation of language becomes especially dangerous when used for ideological ends such as political propaganda or ideological brainwashing.

Abuse of language threatens to be fatal for every community because it destroys authentic human communication. Plato (428/427–347 BCE) branded the eloquent, intelligent Sophists as the most evil and most corrupt twisters of wisdom and truth. It is not without good reason that “right speech,” meaning speaking authentically and faithfully, is counted as one among the basic steps of the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism leading to salvation.¹⁵ Very much along the same line is the call to guarding the tongue in Judaism¹⁶ and, in Christianity, Jesus’ exhortation, “Let your word be ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything more than this comes from the evil one” (Matthew 5:37).

In 1953 Martin Buber, speaking about “Genuine Dialogue and the Possibilities of Peace,” diagnosed the crisis of his time—the Cold War marked by escalating confrontations between East and West—as caused primarily by the loss of the ability to dialogue:

The man in crisis will no longer entrust his cause to conversation because its presupposition—trust—is lacking. This is the reason why the cold war which today goes by the name of peace has been able to overcome mankind. In every earlier period of peace the living word has passed between man and man, time after time drawing the poison from the antagonism of interests and convictions so that these antagonisms have not degenerated into the absurdity of “no-further,” into the madness of “must-wage-war.” The living word of human dialogue that from time to time makes its flights until the madness smothers it, now seems to have become lifeless in the midst of the non-war.¹⁷

15. See Conze, Edward, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (Birmingham, UK: Windhorse, 2001).

16. See Pliskin, Zelig, *Guard Your Tongue: A Practical Guide to the Laws of Loshon Hora Based on Chofetz* (New York: Weissman, 1975).

17. Buber, “Genuine Dialogue,” 236–237.

Recognizing the indisputable importance of dialogue, to engage in it is not only arduous but also risky. It requires trust one will not be deceived by the others, and the preparedness to break away from cherished suppositions if it turns out that these are no longer plausible. To dialogue means travelling down unknown roads with unfamiliar companions, who take a like risk. What is common to all is the existential quest to arrive at an authentically renewed plausibility of the meaning of life and world. There is no excuse—and herein lies the chief evil and pitfall of refusal to dialogue—for exempting *any* content from dialogue, even the most treasured. To withhold the core of one's belief spoils dialogue, because however ready for dialogue one may be in terms of attitude, no authentic communication can take place. The most that might be achieved by withholding one's heart will be a lukewarm, unconvincing, and fraternizing gesture, keeping dialogue partners at arm's length and not taking them seriously. The price of this kind of mock-dialogue is high, for it will prove incapable of controlling anxieties about loss and fears of potential or seemingly imminent threats, attitudes which tend to aggravate proportionally the less prevailing differences are understood. Since reservations cannot dispel suspicion or dismantle mistrust, mock- or sham-dialogues subliminally cultivate anxieties and fears, and actually undermine peaceful coexistence in multicultural, multireligious environments.

In contrast, genuinely religious people will always acknowledge the worldview they have been raised in as well as the specific insights and perceptions of world and life with its accompanying system of values and mores handed down to them by hallowed tradition. They will enter into dialogue with an attitude shaped by values, norms, and convictions from their particular religious background. They cannot do otherwise, because truly religious people will not fear losing their identity in dialogue, since they know that they can retain their own identity only when they bring it into conversation with the challenges posed by significant others. Thus, neither fundamentalism nor conservatism, neither pluralism nor willed-ignorance nor isolationism is a viable option for them. They are aware and know it in their heart that without authentically re-owning their belief in dialogical confrontation with contemporaries and the challenges of the times, their cultural-religious identity will become shallow and dulled, doomed to lose its plausibility. Once cultural-religious norms and directives lose their plausibility they sooner or later will be abandoned, perhaps with a certain sense of relief from their "repressive" claims. Therefore, the only option to reaffirm cherished values and convictions that remains viable is engaging in unconditional, open dialogue.

A dialogical attitude of the kind just outlined requires a fundamental, mature, and daring openness, an openness willing to take risks, which cannot be expected everywhere of everyone at all times, because it renders one vulnerable. This is because such an attitude has nothing in its hands to combat the abuse of language and the exploitation of the situation except its own sincerity,

its authenticity in speaking, and its continual, concerted effort to that end. Still less is such an attitude able to call a halt to the ravages of raw and brute power by resorting to a corresponding counterforce. Trust in the power of the right and proper word is all that remains, the word that not only unmasks dubious intentions, but also brings about renewed trust, reconciled communication, and better understanding. Such trust in the power of words has to be cultivated, of course, for the success of the entire venture. The contributions selected for this compilation reflect such an attitude.

Interreligious Dialogue Lived and Practiced

This book has been compiled to make remarkable articles on interreligious dialogue accessible to a broader, more general audience, especially to college students. The intent is to alert people at an early and decisive stage in life to the pressing need for competent interreligious dialogue and to give firsthand accounts of how this might be done and what it looks like. Instead of repeating what already has been said well and published elsewhere, we decided to select a few seminal articles on the topic of interreligious dialogue from the pen of Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. All authors—some of whom write from within a monastic tradition, some as religious scholars, some as members of a hierarchy—recognize the urgent need for interreligious dialogue and contribute to it by sharing the insights gained from their lived practice in Asia, America, and Europe.

Each of these articles stands on its own and deserves to be studied in depth. The authors do not all share a singular, common view on the topic. Rather, readers will notice a remarkable diversity of approaches and understandings and ways of addressing interreligious dialogue. What is common to all, however, is the seriousness and disarming honesty with which every writer attends to the issue. As such, this anthology powerfully bears witness to what has been explained in this introduction regarding dialogue and religion. There is no idle talk *about* interreligious dialogue. These chapters document *involvement in* interreligious dialogue. They must be studied with this reality in mind, as a sharing of insightful lived reality. Every other approach will miss the point.

As may be expected, the style of these presentations varies considerably. Some pieces are more theoretical and reflective while others are descriptive, narrative, or very personal in character. Given this diversity of backgrounds, contexts, and styles, each article is presented with a short paragraph introducing the author, the original context in which the piece was published, and peculiarities of style and argument. The chapters are arranged in three subsections, beginning with more general reflections about concepts and principles of interreligious dialogue, followed by chapters addressing dialogue from within specific religious or spiritual traditions, and concluding with reports about contemporary

interreligious projects from around the world. An epilogue summarizes some of the basic insights of the various contributions documented here and highlights pertinent features of interreligious dialogue. An appendix provides additional information about several pertinent websites and some other material for supplementary study of the topic.

All this is meant to further the cause of interreligious dialogue and encourage its pursuit—on college campuses, at home, and in society at large.

1

CHAPTER

Interreligious Dialogue

What? Why? How?¹

Paul F. Knitter

EDITOR'S NOTE

Contemporary Roman Catholic theologian Paul F. Knitter, an American, is one of the most articulate advocates for a pluralistic conception of religion. Actively engaged in interreligious dialogue himself, Knitter reflects here about the what, the why, and the how of such pursuits. He safeguards the now almost fashionable call for interreligious dialogue—the “dialogical imperative”—from turning into a trivial truism by highlighting the challenges, difficulties, and gains of any such endeavor. Knitter does not brush aside the claims to ultimate validity of each religion or faith tradition; rather, he honors these. Instead of focusing on the least common denominator of different religions, however, he focuses on what he describes as the shared imperative among religions to announce “a liberating message to . . . the world.” The article unpacks in detail this liberation-centered (or “soteriocentric”) model for interreligious dialogue. Knitter challenges his readers, especially his Christian audience, to reconsider well-established concepts of God, Jesus, and Christ. “If in our interreligious dialogue we can agree that our first concern is not the primacy of our names or the accuracy of our doctrines but, rather, the healing of cripples [i.e., that something gets effectively changed for the better], we will grow in the ability to understand and to call on each others’ names.” Knitter’s learned contribution is a personally authenticated voice for the cause by a deeply religious Christian intellectual raised in Western culture, a voice deserving an attentive hearing.

1. Paul F. Knitter, “Interreligious Dialogue: What? Why? How?,” in *Death or Dialogue? From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*, by Leonard Swidler, John B. Cobb Jr., Paul F. Knitter, Monika K. Hellwig (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press, 1990). Copyright © 1990 Leonard Swidler, John B. Cobb Jr., Paul F. Knitter, Monika K. Hellwig. A portion of the original chapter is reprinted in this book with permission from Bloomsbury Publishing Inc.

From my own experience—gained in conference rooms, libraries, and meditation halls—I would describe interreligious dialogue as the confrontation with utter, bewildering, often threatening *differences* and at the same time, the *trust* that such differences are, for the most part, friendly rather than hostile, fruitful rather than barren. In dialogue one faces the utterly other and trusts that one can speak to, learn from, even work with that other. Within the heart of dialogue, therefore, beats a deep act of faith and trust.

Unpacking this description, I find four pivotal elements in dialogue: (1) the experience of *difference*; (2) the *trust* that such differences are unitive rather than separative; and flowing from these two experiences, (3) the resolve to *witness*, that is, to make known to one's dialogical partner one's own religious experiences and convictions; and (4) the resolve to *listen and learn* from the experiences and convictions of one's partner. As part of my efforts to state what for me constitutes the nature and goals of dialogue, I will try to explore the meaning and demands of these four ingredients. Then I'd like to state why I think that the present state of our suffering and liberation-needy world is providing all religious believers with a newly felt *imperative* and *opportunity* to mix those ingredients and pursue interreligious dialogue. Responding to this new imperative and opportunity, I would then like to suggest a liberation-centered (or "soterio-centric") model for interreligious dialogue which, I think, will both make for a more effective encounter of religions and will enable Christians to remove one of their main stumbling blocks to dialogue—their traditional understanding of the exclusivity or superiority of Christ and Christianity. All this makes for the what, the why, and the how of dialogue.

Dialogue: What Is It?

Differences

Anyone who begins an interreligious conversation with the announcement of how much we have in common or that we are really saying "the same thing in different words" has done just that—only begun the conversation. Such announcements, though they may have their element of truth, can be maintained only on the surface of dialogue; they begin to fade away as one goes deeper into the experience, the beliefs and practices, and the historical development of the different religious traditions. Like a newly married couple growing out of the first stages of infatuation into real living together, partners in religious sharing, as they get to know each other, soon arrive at the existential realization of how bewilderingly different they are. What had been initially experienced as similarities now become differing, even opposing, faces. The Tao and God, Zen meditation and Christian prayer, Jesus and Buddha, *avidya* [Sanskrit: ignorance, delusion] and original sin—become as different as they once were similar. One

gradually becomes aware of the naiveté and the downright danger of proclaiming a “common essence” or a “common core” within all the religions of the world. Yes, one might still believe that Ultimate Reality or God is one and that ultimately differences will be swallowed in oneness; but right now, in the dust and dirt of the real world, we have to deal with the manyness, the differences, among the religions before we can ever contemplate, much less realize, their possible unity or oneness.

In reflecting on this experience of difference, I find myself in basic agreement with the so-called “antifoundationalists.” Today, philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Richard Bernstein, together with theologians such as George Lindbeck, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, David Tracy, and Raimundo Panikkar chide religious dialoguers who are looking for a common “religious Esperanto” or are proposing a “universal theology of religions”² or a “world theology,”³ that they may be searching for a chimera or imposing an ideological system.⁴ As far as we can tell, in this finite world of many cultures and religions and histories, there is no universal foundation outside the fray of history and diversity on which we can make universal judgments and assess the diversity. Plurality is it! It will not yield an Archimedean point by which we can lift ourselves beyond the plurality to a final unity. Or so it seems.

We are, in a sense, caught in our own cultural-religious perspectives—or at least inescapably influenced by them. If there is no such thing as “pure experience”; if all experience is “interpreted,” then we are always looking at the world through our inherited cultural-religious spectacles.⁵ As Lindbeck convincingly points out, we don’t first have an experience of God or of ultimacy and then turn to our religion to “interpret” or “represent” it; rather, our religion’s interpretation or language has a determinative influence on what kind of religious experience we have.⁶ If the interpretations are markedly different (“Emptiness” [referring to the core Buddhist concept of *shunyata/sunyata*] vs. “God” [implying personal presence and substance]), then the experiences will be equally different.

2. Leonard Swidler, ed., *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987).

3. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Toward a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press and London: Macmillan, 1981).

4. Raimundo Panikkar, “The Invisible Harmony: A Universal Theory of Religion or a Cosmic Confidence in Reality?” in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), 118–53; Raimundo Panikkar, “The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments in Christic Self-Consciousness,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll: Orbis Books and London: SCM Press, 1987), 89–116.

5. Steven T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), 26.

6. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 40, 49.

Between the religions of the world, therefore, there yawn “incommensurability gaps”—even between their mystics!⁷ We can look at and speak to one another, we can form some “picture” of who the other is, but we cannot really understand one another sufficiently to pass judgments on the truth or falsity, the goodness or harmfulness, of one another’s religious beliefs and practices. That would require moving beyond our own historico-cultural perspectives or limitations and taking on, thoroughly, that of the others. But that is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Since there seems to be no universal “foundation” beyond our particular “standpoints,” every time we judge another’s religion we are doing so from our own “standpoint,” not theirs. We are doing so from outside their religion. And that’s not fair.

Given my own experience of dialogue and thanks to the chidings of my antifoundationalist friends, I have realized over the past years that I, like many proponents of religious pluralism, have too hastily hoisted the banner of “pluralism,” before sufficiently recognizing the reality of “plurality.” We pluralists have been too quick to propose an “ism” or a system on the vast, buzzing array of plurality; and in so *proposing* we have *imposed*. David Tracy’s admonition, arising out of his own experience of religious otherness, rings true:

. . . the official pluralist too often finds ways to reduce real otherness and genuine differences to some homogenized sense of what we (who is this “we”?) already know . . . some pluralists, the vaunted defenders of difference, can become the great reductionists—reducing differences to mere similarity, reducing otherness to the same, and reducing plurality to my community of right-thinking competent critics. In this light, there is truth in Simone de Beauvoir’s⁸ bitter charge that “pluralism is the perfect ideology for the bourgeois mind.”⁹

Trust

And yet, though we stare at each other’s religious traditions across these incommensurability gaps, though we well realize the difficulty of understanding, and the danger of judging, another person’s religious beliefs and practices, we find ourselves borne or grasped by a suspicion, a hope, a resolve that we *can* speak to each other across our religious barriers; that it is worthwhile, even necessary, to do so. This is, indeed, an act of faith. It is a deep-seated feeling which seems to be given to us or to take hold of us; we find ourselves believing in something

7. Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1982).

8. Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), French existentialist philosopher.

9. David Tracy, “Christianity in the Wider Context: Demands and Transformations,” *Religion and Intellectual Life* 4, no. 4 (1987): 12.

which, though rooted in experiential evidence, goes beyond that evidence. It is similar to Luther's "*trotzdem*," his "despite all that": despite the stark differences between religions, we believe that the sheer actuality of *plurality* can lead to the inter-relatedness of *pluralism*. There is *life* in the differences. In speaking to one another across our gaps, we can come closer.

In fact, it seems that this coming closer, this conversation with those who are genuinely different, is an indispensable condition for growing in the understanding of reality, in the pursuit of truth. If there is no absolute criterion of truth given to us from above, if there is no foundation outside the waves of history for evaluating the many forced opinions that face our world, then we must plunge into the conversation, listen to each other's differences, and in this engagement fashion, step by difficult step, our understanding of reality. In order to "grow in wisdom and truth before God and our fellow human beings," we must talk to each other. In order to enrich and save our world we must embrace pluralism. "Pluralism is a responsible and fruitful option because it allows for (indeed demands) that we develop better ways as selves, as communities of inquirers, as societies, as cultures, as an inchoately global culture to allow for more possibilities to enrich our personal and communal lives."¹⁰

In the ebb and flow of conversing, with all its complexity and dangers, we can create, not foundations, but "shaky common ground." Not with prepackaged methods or systems but by genuinely trying to "pass over" to the otherness of the other, by stretching our own visions and paradigms, we can establish new, shared ground on which we *can* truly understand another culture or religion, and they us. The gap of incommensurability *can* be bridged—but the bridge will never be set in cement; it will, rather, sway in the wind and have to be frequently reconstructed or torn down to be rebuilt at a better crossing. Just how these bridges are built and how this common shaky ground is discovered cannot be stated in advance of the conversation. It can be discovered, created, maintained only in the act and process of dialogue.

Witnessing

In interreligious dialogue we confront otherness as something we want not only to embrace but also to address. Ideally, we come to the conversation from a position of richness, not impoverishment—that is, we speak to each other out of our own religious experience. We speak because we have discovered something of value—the pearl of great price. As Raimundo Panikkar has continuously insisted, in order to have religious encounter, we must speak from religious experience—or at least from religious quest. Such "subjective" contents and perspectives are not to be cut out and packed in some kind of deep-freeze "*epoché*" [detached

10. Ibid., 9.

reflection] but, rather, are to be poured, warm and bubbling, into the conversation.¹¹ The “object” of dialogue is approached through a meeting of “subjects.”

And because we speak out of our different religious experiences and convictions, we will seek not only to explain but to *persuade*. If genuinely experienced, religious truth, like all truth, can never be only “for me.” If it is, it is somehow diluted or not yet fully grown. A quality of “universal relevance” is ingredient to every encounter with or revelation of the Ultimate; what one has seen, felt, been transformed by—can also so affect others. All interreligious dialogue, therefore, is animated by a certain missionary élan. We want our partners to see what we have seen; we want their lives to be touched and transformed as ours have been. Yes, let me use the offensive word: we want to *convert* our partners.

But the conversion that is sought is not one of “winning over” but of sharing. This is a big difference—between saving from damnation and sharing the light. This distinction is based on the difference between religious truth experienced as “universally relevant” and as “one and only.” Authentic religious experience naturally includes the former quality, not the latter. When experienced, truth is always felt to be *universal*; it is not necessarily felt to be *singular* or *final*. In Christian terms, the God who has spoken for *all peoples* in Jesus Christ has not necessarily spoken *only* in Jesus Christ. Therefore, what animates me in the dialogue is not the conviction that you are lost without my understanding of truth, but that there *is* something missing in your life until you have seen what I have seen. You can be different, richer, if I can pass on to you what has been passed on to me.

All this paints a rather idealistic picture of the element of witnessing in dialogue. Witnessing can take in other forms, and be present in different degrees. We might enter the dialogue not from a position of strength but from one of weakness; or better, a position of searching rather than of discovery; perhaps it is a position of dissatisfaction with one’s own tradition. While genuine conversation can arise from such states of dissatisfaction or insecurity, I would not spotlight them as the ideal, as does Peter Berger when he urges that the most profitable kind of religious dialogue is that “between people who are very unsure of their position rather than people who are firmly committed to their traditions.”¹² Also, in holding that we give witness in order to “enrich” not to “save,” I don’t want to rule out the demands of situations in which we confront what we feel is genuine *evil* in the other’s attitude or practices; then the conversion we seek is much more a matter of *metanoia* [Greek: repentance], of trying to “turn around” our partners, rather than of clarifying or enhancing what they already know. Or, as the liberation theologians would put it, announcing often requires denouncing.

11. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (NY: Paulist Press, 1978).

12. Peter Berger, “The Pluralistic Situation and the Coming Dialogue between the World Religions,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 1 (1981): 36.

Learning

But the dialectical pendulum swings back, and just as much as we desire to witness and convert, we feel the need to be witnessed to and, yes, converted by our partners. Witnessing will go astray unless it is accompanied by listening and learning. This need to learn from others is rooted in the same “trust,” described above, that the “other” has words of life to speak to us. But it is also rooted in and demanded by our own religious experience. In Christian terms, to experience the living God is not only to experience a truth and a power that is “universally relevant,” to be proclaimed to all the nations; it is also to fall into the embrace of a Mystery that will always and enticingly be more than what we have experienced. To experience this Mystery of God authentically is to know for sure that we are experiencing it only *partially*. All religious traditions seem to bear witness to this aspect of religious experience—that God, Allah, Brahman [the basic principle in Hinduism], Sunyata [i.e., emptiness], the Tao—can never be known *in toto* but only *in parte*. And if only partially, then we must be open to discovering “other parts”; we must look through other windows out on to the universe of Truth and Mystery. As wonderful as is the view from our window, it impels us to look through others. Max Müller’s worn dictum holds true: “Those who know one, know none.”

The need to learn from others is also fostered by what cultural historians have called our age of “post-modernity.” As post-moderns, we have lost much of the innocence or bright-eyed optimism that was bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment. Still hopeful about the future, we are also suspicious of all grandiose or sure-fire visions of the future. Thanks to the progenitors of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” such as Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, we have come to realize the limits and the corruptions of reason and the human heart; in our noblest and most reasoned efforts to know the truth and fashion our world, in every effort to interpret the revelation given us by God, there is the worm of *ideology*—the ever lurking propensity to use our “truth” as a means of assuring our own advantage or control over that of others. Ideology stalks our noblest ideals and projects. As Walter Benjamin has said, “Every work of civilization [we could add, every work of religion] is at the same time a work of barbarism.”¹³

Such ideological abuse of religion is not just an “error” that can be pointed out and neatly removed. It is, rather, a “systemic distortion.”¹⁴ We cannot defend ourselves against such distortions by ourselves. We need others—the insights and perspectives of others who look at the world differently than we do, who can look at our visions of truth from a critical standpoint outside our circle, who perhaps can tell us how our “truth” has excluded or victimized them. We must,

13. Benjamin in David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (NY: Harper & Row and London: SCM Press, 1987), 69.

14. *Ibid.*, 73.

again, *learn* from others, so they can point out our distortions, our self-centered abuse of the truth that has been given us. Combining the insights of Max Müller and Walter Benjamin, we can say, “Those who know one, turn that one into a work of barbarism.”

But our heightened awareness of the *need* to learn from others does not diminish our realization of the *difficulty* of doing so. As stated above, every interreligious encounter reveals how utterly different we really are and how much our understanding of the other is limited and clouded by our own perspectives; we are always looking into, rather than from out of, the other religion. If we somehow trust that we can look from within and genuinely understand, how might we act on this trust?

One way of answering that hermeneutical question lies along the lines of David Tracy’s *analogical imagination*. Tracy states succinctly what this means for interreligious dialogue:

The phrase can remind conversation partners that difference and otherness once interpreted *as* other and *as* different are thereby acknowledged as in some way possible and, in the end, analogous. . . . Authentic analogical language is a rare achievement since it attempts the nearly impossible: an articulation of real differences as genuinely different but also similar to what we already know.¹⁵

Tracy is inviting us to let our imaginations have free play as we attempt to “pass over” to the differences in the other religions; entering into these differences we may well discover that the very strangeness and difference becomes for us an unthought-of *possibility*. What was foreign, perhaps threatening, now becomes an invitation. The “other” in its otherness becomes a *disclosure* of new possibility, new truth. The other becomes analogical: both dissimilar and similar at the same time. In Tracy’s words:

In the to-and-fro movement of the game of conversation where the question or subject matter is allowed to “take over,” we learn to abjure our constant temptation to control all reality by reducing all difference to the “same” (viz., what “we” already believe). In that same to-and-fro movement of conversation, we learn to allow the other, the different, to become other *for us*—i.e., as a genuinely *possible* mode-of-being-in-the-world, *as* other, *as* different, *as* possible, thus as a similarity-in-difference, an analogy.¹⁶

Tracy’s advice helps, but we feel the need for more concrete direction. How to put this analogical imagination into practice? Where do we start? Answers to

15. *Ibid.*, 93.

16. Tracy, “Christianity in the Wider Context,” 18.

such practical questions can be found, I suggest, in the new context for interreligious dialogue that is presented by our contemporary world.

A New Context and *kairos*¹⁷ for Dialogue

The title of a recently published book by David Lochhead captures what main-line Christian churches are growing aware of: a “dialogical imperative.”¹⁸ No doubt, this imperative is fed by the more philosophical considerations we have already mentioned: given the “lack of foundations,” dialogue is the only show in town for an authentic pursuit of truth, and given the post-modern awareness of ideology, we have to talk with others to keep ourselves from turning “truth” into tools of oppression. There are also more expressly religious and theological reasons why the Second Vatican Council¹⁹ and recent statements of the World Council of Churches²⁰ have pointed to interreligious dialogue as an imperative for all Christians.

Two pivotal Christian beliefs convince Christians that dialogue is no longer a frill that can be pursued on Sunday afternoon when the rest of the chores are done, but something that pertains to the essence of Christian life. (1) The God of Abraham and of Jesus is a God whose love and revealing activity are universal and not to be confined to any one period or people; this means that there is most likely revelatory “gold in the hills” of other religions. (2) Also, if the entire law and the prophets are indeed summarized in the law of love of neighbor, then respecting and listening to our non-Christian neighbors has a clear priority over subjecting them to doctrinal claims about the finality of Christ and the inadequacy of extra-biblical religion. The ethics of love takes precedence over the doctrine of uniqueness.

Recognizing the validity of these reasons for the dialogical imperative, I want to suggest that our present-day world confronts us with an even greater and more urgent need for interreligious cooperation and conversation. It is a need that not only places dialogue in the center stage of every religion’s concern but, in doing so, provides new opportunities for an even richer, more fruitful interreligious encounter. I am talking about the need for *liberation*.

17. Greek for “opportune time.”

18. David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books and London: SCM Press, 1988).

19. See the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965.

20. The World Council of Churches (WCC) is the global communion of Protestant churches organized in 1948 and headquartered at Geneva, Switzerland. In 1979 they produced *Guidelines for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (Geneva: WCC, 1979).

Liberation: Demanding and Facilitating Dialogue

Somewhat audaciously I am taking up the battered question of a “common core” within all religions. Today, most authorities have long dismissed this question as either impossible (we can never tell) or dangerous (the common core is defined by *me* for *you*). Certainly I do not want to resurrect the quest for a neatly defined “common essence” within all religions that can be found if we just scratch away the differing cultural accretions.²¹ And yet, with others, I believe that although the religions of the world are apples and oranges and are more different than they are alike, still there is a quality of “fruit-fulness” that characterizes them all and out of which a “common ground” for shared conversation can be established.

What this commonality is, is hard to find or define. Some still look for it in the depths (or heights) of mystical experience.²² Others find it in the shared concern of all religions to move their followers from ego-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.²³ Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate* holds to the more traditional and cautious assertion that all religions deal with common questions and concerns that have weighed on humankind since its birth. Revisionist theologians would seem to concur when they claim that there is a “common human experience” that serves as the sounding-board and criterion for the truth-claims of all religions.²⁴

I suggest that our contemporary world enables us, not so happily, to lend precision to this quest for what might be common to our varied religious pursuits. Today there are particular, concrete questions, dangers, problems that, willy-nilly, are confronting all religions and demanding responses from them. They are questions that transcend cultural and religious differences, and if they do not require the religions to look at each other, they certainly require them all to look in the same direction. They touch *all* religions because they are the kind of questions that not only demand immediate attention but cannot be answered, so it seems, without some kind of transformation of the human species, without some kind of new vision or new way of understanding who we are as humans and how we are to live on this dizzying, threatened planet. In calling for a radically different way of viewing our world and acting in it, in confronting the

21. Arnold Toynbee, “The Task of Disengaging the Essence from the Non-essentials in Mankind’s Religious Heritage,” in *An Historian’s Approach to Religion* (London and NY: Oxford University Press, 1956), 261–83.

22. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, eds. Naomi Burton, et al. (NY: New Directions Books and London: Sheldon Press, 1968), 311, 315; David Steindl-Rast, “Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today?” in *The Christ and the Bodhisattva*, eds. Donald S. Lopez Jr. and Steven C. Rockefeller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 99–116.

23. John Hick, “On Grading Religions,” *Religious Studies* 17, no. 4 (1981): 464–7; Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 84, 89–90.

24. Schubert Ogden, “What is Theology?” *The Journal of Religion*, 52, no. 1 (1972): 22–40; David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (NY: Seabury, 1975), 43–63.

limits of the human condition as we know it, they are *religious* questions—questions that every religion either has tried to answer, or will want to answer, or will be required to answer.

What is common to these cross-cultural, cross-religious questions is that all of them, in different ways, are calling for some form of this-worldly, earthly (as opposed to purely spiritual) *liberation*. Our contemporary world is a world aware, as never before so it seems, of oppression—oppression in an array of horrible forms. It is, in other words, a world painfully aware of the need for liberation, for breaking bonds, for preserving, restoring, fostering life. I am suggesting, therefore, that *liberation*—what it is and how to achieve it—constitutes a new arena for the encounter of religions. Briefly, I will list (more is not possible or necessary at the moment) the forms of oppression and needed liberation that can gather all religions into a new community of concern and conversation.

A World in Need of Liberation

1. *Liberation from physical suffering.* Certainly most of us are familiar with—to the point, perhaps, of immunity—the appalling statistics about the vast numbers of people who suffer chronically from some form or forms of physical suffering because they are deprived of the most fundamental human necessities. They—and most painfully, their children—suffer because they do not have enough to eat, or do not have a balanced diet, or do not have a reliable or clean water supply, or must live in disease-infested conditions, or do not have access to needed medical care or supplies. We are told that the majority of our earth's population lives in some such conditions.

For more and more people, such realities scream to heaven and to religious sensitivities. Whatever their tradition, religious believers are coming to feel that their religion must confront such basic physical needs and sufferings and that whatever salvation or enlightenment or *moksha*²⁵ may mean, such beliefs have to say something about this kind of suffering. Granted that we have to bear with the effects of karma,²⁶ granted that we will never realize the fullness of the kingdom, granted that *dukkha*²⁷ adheres to the human condition, granted that there will be another life here or elsewhere—still, Hindus, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists are recognizing that if any of these traditional beliefs become the reason or occasion for ignoring or condoning such human suffering, then such beliefs lose their credibility. Even the most traditionally “other-worldly” religions are showing concern and trying to formulate some kind of response to our world's growing awareness of human suffering. Tables bare of bread and water can become the tables around which the religions of the world gather to talk and act.

25. Sanskrit for “salvific liberation, release,” important in Hinduism.

26. Sanskrit for “‘action’ impacting fate,” a basic concept in Indian religions.

27. Pali for “suffering,” a basic concept in Buddhism.

2. *Liberation from socio-economic oppression.* The world of widespread physical suffering impinges all the more on our religious sensitivities when we face up to the further reality that most of these sufferings are not natural—that they are caused by the way human beings treat other human beings or use others for their own self-serving purposes. Oppression and injustice are chains that crisscross our globe, nationally and multi-nationally, and have become almost an “unavoidable” part of socio-economic and political structures. Forged as they often are in the kilns of racism and sexism, these chains keep vast portions of our national or global population in bondage, denying them a voice in the decisions of power and in determining their own lives. There is a vast “underbelly” of history—people who, in their victimization, produce the labor, the raw materials, the armies that have sustained the course of history.

Yet this “silent majority” of oppressed is, today, no longer silent. Centuries of injustice are erupting in the consciousness of Third World peoples and flowing into the conscience of the First and Second Worlds. As the final conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in New Delhi, 1981, announced:

Over against this dramatic picture of poverty, oppression, and the threat of total destruction, a new consciousness has arisen among the downtrodden. This growing consciousness of the tragic reality of the Third World has caused the irruption of exploited classes, marginalized cultures, and humiliated races. They are burst from the underside of history into the world long dominated by the West. It is an irruption expressed in revolutionary struggles, political uprisings, and liberation movements. It is an irruption of religious and ethnic groups looking for affirmation of their authentic identity, of women demanding recognition and equality, of youth protesting dominant systems and values. It is an irruption of all those who struggle for full humanity and for their rightful place in history.²⁸

As the EATWOT theologians stated, this eruption is a challenge not only for Christianity but for all religions—a challenge that does seem to be transforming the consciousness of members of all religions as they realize that unless they can speak a word of protest against socio-political oppression and announce a message of liberation, their religious words will grow more and more feeble. The hope that Hans Küng has drawn from his experience of interreligious dialogue is shared by many: “Numerous conversations in the Far and Near East have convinced me that in the future all the great religions will foster a vital awareness of the guarantee of human rights, the emancipation of women, the

28. Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, eds., *The Irruption of the Third World: A Challenge to Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 195.

realization of social justice, and the immorality of war.”²⁹ Thus the need for socio-economic justice is calling all religions to a forum in which they all need to and want to speak.

3. **Liberation from nuclear oppression/holocaust.** There is another form of oppression even more pervasive than that of socio-economic injustice; it grips First, Second, and Third Worlds equally. The realization that the entire population of the planet could be snuffed out by the pressing of a few buttons by a few political figures—whose political and psychological judgment and sanity we often have good cause to question—terrorizes us all. For the first time in its history, the human race is capable of something never before possible: humanocide. Humanity is able to commit communal suicide. “We thought to go to the moon, to divine the bottom of the ocean, to become God, but never did we think to wipe out humanity as such.”³⁰

Liberation from nuclear oppression, some would say, is the hour’s most pressing and most communal issue; it touches and terrorizes all of us. Gordon Kaufman is right: “The possibility of nuclear holocaust is the premier issue which our generation must face . . . [it is among] the central and defining features of our lives as human beings in the so-called civilized world in the late twentieth century.”³¹ If then, as Einstein said, after the dropping of the first atom bomb, everything is different, it is also different for the religions of the world. As evinced in worldwide religious peace movements such as the World Conference of Religions for Peace,³² religious believers are recognizing that they cannot continue with their religious “as usuals” but must draw on the riches of their traditions to address the oppressive menace of war and nuclear conflict. Peace, understood as the overcoming of this nuclear oppression, is becoming a *universal religious symbol* that challenges and calls together all religions.

4. **Liberation from ecological disaster.** Some would argue that there is an even more menacing oppression that threatens our lives and especially the lives of our children. Today, not only is the human species unjustly exploiting and killing off its own, not only is it maddeningly on the brink of humanocide, but it is also strangling the source of all life—mother earth and the eco-system. The industrial revolution, which has brought such advantages to our species, has also created an altar of consumerism and profiteering on which daily the lifeblood of mother earth is poured. Thomas Berry, one of the most forceful of earth-prophets, does not exaggerate: “Our industrial economy is closing down the planet in the

29. Hans Küng, “What is True Religion? Toward an Ecumenical Criteriology,” in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 241.

30. R. Rapp, “Cultural Disarmament,” *Interculture* 18, no. 4 (1985): 16.

31. Gordon D. Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 14, 12.

32. The World Conference of Religions for Peace is a multireligious congress that first convened in Kyoto, Japan, in 1970. Religions for Peace invites world religious leaders to take part in congresses to share their goals and contribute to world peace in the spirit of interreligious cooperation.

most basic modes of its functioning. The air, the water, the soil are already in a degraded condition. Forests are dying on every continent. The seas are endangered. Aquatic life forms in lakes and streams and in the seas are contaminated. The rain is acid.”³³ For Berry, such ecological oppression should precede every other issue on the international and interreligious agenda:

For the first time we are determining the destinies of the earth in a comprehensive and irreversible manner. The immediate danger is not *possible* nuclear war but *actual* industrial plundering.³⁴

The issue of inter-human tensions is secondary to earth-human tensions. If humans will not become functional members of the earth community, how can humans establish functional relationships among themselves?³⁵

However we might rank the need for ecological liberation, it clearly is another issue that stares all religions in the face and demands answers and actions and new visions.

Concern for the wellbeing of the planet is the one concern that hopefully will bring the nations [and religions] of the world into an inter-nation [and interreligious] community.³⁶

If the need for socio-economic, nuclear, ecological liberation is *the* “common human experience” painfully present to all religions, if in light of this experience representatives of the different religious traditions are looking into their individual soteriologies [the salvific concepts they hold dear] and realizing that they have a liberating message to announce to the world, then we can indeed claim that the religions today are standing on a common ground on which they can construct a more fruitful dialogue. And if we consider that this liberation cannot be realized piecemeal, in this or that culture or nation, but must be a worldwide, interconnected effort, then it becomes clear that a new dialogue among religions is not only possible, it is absolutely *necessary*. Worldwide liberation calls for a worldwide religious dialogue. The religions must talk to each other not only, as John Cobb has announced, to undergo “mutual transformation” but to foster world-transformation.

Which brings us to our third interrogative—if we face this newly felt imperative for dialogue, *how* can we best respond to it?

33. Thomas Berry, “Economics as a Religious Issue,” in *Riverdale Papers X* (Riverdale, NY: Riverdale Center for Religious Research, 1985), 4.

34. *Ibid.*, 3.

35. Thomas Berry, “The Cosmology of Peace,” in *Riverdale Papers X* (Riverdale, NY: Riverdale Center for Religious Research, 1985), 3–4.

36. *Ibid.*, 3.

How to Dialogue?

Much useful advice has been given on the “rules for dialogue.”³⁷ Perhaps one of the simplest and most useable sets of guidelines can be found in Bernard Lonergan’s “transcendental precepts” for human knowing and deciding:³⁸

1. *Be attentive.* We must be open and able genuinely to listen to what the dialogue partner is saying, no matter how foreign or strange or false it might seem. This requires our being able to step outside of our own world and our own interests and convictions—not to give them up, but to see beyond them. One of the best “techniques” for attempting this is described by John Dunne as “passing over”; using our feelings and imagination, we try to follow the symbols and stories and world-views of another culture or religion in order to enter and walk in its world. We allow, as it were, the other tradition to study us as much as we it.³⁹
2. *Be intelligent.* We must make the sincere effort to understand what we have experienced and heard. This, of course, is even more difficult and will call for even more stretching. Here something like David Tracy’s “analogical imagination,” as described above, can serve us well.
3. *Be reasonable.* This is the step many of the rules for dialogue leave out or water down. We must try to evaluate the truth or falsity, the rightness or wrongness, of what we have understood. Without such effort to judge, dialogue becomes a purely academic pastime or innocuous chit-chat—aimed perhaps at understanding the world but providing no energy to change it. And yet, in the interreligious conversation, this transcendental principle is as dangerous as it is necessary; we noted above how easily and unconsciously we can impose our criteria of right or wrong on another. We need some kind of *shared* criteria or common ground, which, however, cannot be an ontological, unchangeable *foundation*, but must be created or discovered as shared “shaky ground” within the dialogue itself. Yet as we asked earlier, how to go about this creation or discovery?
4. *Be responsible and change if you must.* What we have understood and judged to be true and good lays claim on us. If dialogue is to be honest and fruitful, we must respond to these claims. Having come to new insights, having identified the good where we did not expect it, we must live those insights and do that good. This may well mean changing certain previous beliefs,

37. Swidler, *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, 13–16.

38. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (NY: Herder & Herder and London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1972), 3–25; cf. Vernon Gregson, *Lonergan, Spirituality, and the Meaning of Religion* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).

39. John Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press and London: SPCK, 1972), ix, 53.

attitudes, practices. It may mean, in Cobb's terms, transformation, even the kind we didn't plan on.⁴⁰ Dialogue without this possibility of conversion is like a sleek aircraft that can take us anywhere but is not allowed to land.

Conditions for the Possibility of Fruitful Interreligious Dialogue

Clearly, the obstacles to living out these transcendental principles for dialogue are many. Overcoming the obstacles is a matter of experience, perseverance, and increasing skill. I would like to suggest two conditions which, if fulfilled, will facilitate the "art of dialogue" and will help remove the roadblocks. In fact, I am tempted to state that unless these conditions are met, dialogue is bound to bog down in entrenched or imposed positions.

First of all, religious believers cannot approach the table of dialogue with claims (on or below the table!) of having "the final word," or the "definitive revelation," or the "absolute truth," or the "absolute savior." Such claims stymie each of the transcendental principles: (1) How can we be genuinely *attentive* to what is different when our final norm has judged what is different to be inferior? (2) How can we freely and with abandon apply an analogical imagination to *understand* new possibilities when our final and unsurpassable revelation has excluded any worthwhile possibilities better than our own? (3) In trying to make interreligious *evaluations* of truth and value, doesn't a definitive revelation meant to fulfill all others oblige us "in God's name" to impose our criteria on all others? (4) Finally, how can we *change* and endorse the differing visions of other religious figures if ours is the absolute savior, before whom every other religious knee must bend?⁴¹ It would seem, therefore, that the revision of traditional understandings of "the uniqueness of Christ and Christianity" (together with similar understandings of the uniqueness of the Qur'an or of Krishna [one of the main deities in Hinduism] or of Buddha) is a condition for the possibility of fruitful dialogue.

Such a statement rankles many. Let me clarify what is intended. In questioning absolute or final truth claims, I am not at all questioning the necessity of entering the dialogue with firm convictions, with personal commitments to what one holds to be true and sacred, and with a universal message. Such clear, strong positions are the stuff of dialogue. But I am suggesting that in order for our commitment to be full and our claims to be clear and universal, they need not be final, superior, unsurpassable. For something to be *really* true, it need not be the *only* truth; conversely, to allow for *many* truths does not automatically

40. John Cobb Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

41. This is a reference to Philippians 2:10.

permit *any*. What I am trying to say is more clearly lived than explained. Langdon Gilkey describes it as the paradox of practice that is required of any believer in our world of religious pluralism: we must be *absolutely* committed to positions that we know are *relative*. How to combine such absolute personal commitment with a recognition of the relativity of all religious forms and figures is one of the central challenges and responsibilities of religious believers today.⁴²

I venture to propose another condition for the possibility of authentic dialogue that is, on the other end of the spectrum, even more controversial than the first, for it carries the appearance of a veiled foundationalism. Picking up another pivotal element in Lonergan's analysis of the dynamics of cognitional structure, but moving in a direction different from Lonergan, I would suggest that for dialogue to really work it should, ideally, be "founded" (dangerous word!) on a conversion shared by all participants. Lonergan speaks about conversion as the foundation for applying his transcendental principles to theology: an *intellectual conversion*, by which we realize that knowing is not a matter of hearing or taking a look but of appropriating the process of experiencing, understanding and judging; a *moral conversion*, by which we attempt to *do* and live up to the truth we affirm; and especially, *religious conversion*, by which we "fall in love unrestrictedly" with the Mystery of the true and the good and so become empowered to know it and live it.⁴³ With his religious conversion, which sublates intellectual and moral conversion, Lonergan ends up with a form of mystical experience as the foundation of religious dialogue. This is where I want to shift directions.

Rather than calling for a common religious or mystical conversion as the starting point of dialogue, I would suggest, in light of our present *kairos* of "liberation" that presses on all religions, that religious believers begin their conversations with a common moral conversion by which they commit themselves to addressing and removing the sufferings of our race and of our planet. A shared commitment and a shared praxis toward promoting justice and socio-economic, nuclear, and ecological liberation would be the starting point (not the absolute foundation) that would enable religious believers to be attentive to, understand, and judge each other and so transform each other and the world. Let me explain how such a *liberation-centered* (or soteriocentric) model for dialogue might work.

A liberation-centered model for interreligious dialogue

I am well aware (or, I think I am) that what I am proposing as a *center* may sound like, or easily develop into, a *foundation*; and that opens the door to the danger of imperialism, for it is usually the people with the power who

42. Langdon Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll: Orbis Books and London: SCM Press, 1987), 44–50.

43. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 101–24, 267–93.

determine the foundation. So I want to stress that when I hold up conversion to the suffering and commitment to liberation as the starting point for dialogue, I am *proposing* not *imposing*. It is a proposal which I believe representatives from all religious traditions have accepted or will accept. The awareness of oppression and of the need for liberation is permeating and challenging religious consciousness throughout the world. The issues, as I argued above, are *religious*, for their solutions call for the energy and hope of religious values and visions; Hindus, Buddhists, Christians are realizing with increasing clarity that unless they respond to the “cries of the oppressed,” they will be judged by the world as narcissistic pastimes or as opium.⁴⁴

Furthermore, as believers allow the plight of the poor and the call for liberation to illumine their scriptures and traditions, as they review their soteriologies in the light of our world’s oppressions, they realize that they *do* have a liberative word to speak, a message for the suffering planet. I have tried to argue elsewhere that all religions can endorse a soteriocentric model for liberation because all of them, in different ways and degrees, contain a “soteriocentric core,” a concern and vision for the welfare of humanity in this world. The models for human welfare and liberation admittedly differ, often drastically—and here we have the stuff of dialogue—but there is a shared concern that human beings be changed and saved, in this world.⁴⁵ Whether this is indeed the case, whether there is a soteriocentric core or concern within all religions that would enable a liberation-centered dialogue, can be known, of course, only within the dialogue itself.

Granting that significant numbers of representatives from various traditions can endorse a liberation-centered dialogue, how would it function? I suggest that it might profitably follow the turns of Juan Luis Segundo’s hermeneutical circle, which he proposed as a liberation-centered model for revisioning Christian theology.⁴⁶

According to Segundo, the preliminary “warm-up exercise” for the dialogue would call on all participants to train themselves in a wary attitude of hermeneutical suspicion. Before approaching each other, they would try to train and tune themselves to detect where it is in their own beliefs and practices and scriptural interpretations they have turned belief into ideology. They need to prepare themselves for what dialogue will most likely reveal to them—instances where they have used their religion or sold out their original vision to “adjust” to the *status quo*, to curry the favor of the mighty, to hold the reins of dominance over others. That ideology inevitably creeps into all religious consciousness and practice is not the greatest of evils; far more dangerous is it to be unaware or to deny

44. This refers to the critique of religion by philosopher Karl Marx, who in 1844 likened religion to “opium,” sedating people so they would not challenge unjust and discriminating conditions.

45. Panikkar, “The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges.”

46. Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975), 7–9.

that this is the plight of all religions, including one's own. With a healthy dose of hermeneutical suspicion, then, we are warmed up for dialogue.

But we are still not ready for the actual conversation with other religious believers. What the liberation theologians say of Christian theology applies to interreligious dialogue—*dialogue is always a second step*.⁴⁷ Here is the hinge-pin of the soteriocentric model for dialogue: we begin not with conversations about doctrine or ritual, nor even with prayer or meditation (though all these elements are essential to the effort to pass over to each other's traditions); rather, we begin with some form of *liberative praxis*. We engage in efforts to liberate ourselves or others or our planet from whatever form of oppression we agree to be pressing in our immediate context—and we do so, not separately in our different religious camps, but *together*.

This will require that as Hindus or Buddhists or Jews we work together in trying to identify and understand the cause of the oppression or suffering we are facing; we attempt some kind of shared socio-economic analysis of the problem and what might be the solution; admittedly the solutions we discuss will be inspired by our different religious convictions. Then we roll up our sleeves together to act—to do whatever we think needs to be done. This will, of course, require that we work with and especially *learn from* those who are the oppressed and suffering. *Liberative praxis means identifying with and learning from the struggling poor*; it recognizes what has been called the “hermeneutical privilege” or the “epistemological priority” of the struggling poor—that unless we are listening to the voice of their experience, our efforts to understand our world and our religious traditions will be vitally maimed.

With the oppressed, then, and as members of different religious communities, we work for justice or for peace or for ecological sustainability. Such acting will gather our differing communities into a common community of shared courage, frustration, anger, anguish; it will bring us together in the common experience of fear, of danger, perhaps of imprisonment and even martyrdom. It will also join us in shared success and victory in changing the structures of oppression into communities of justice, cooperation, unity.

Such liberative praxis, with its peaks and its pits, will be the matrix of—and imperative for—our dialogical *reflection*. Under the momentum of praxis, the hermeneutical circle moves to reflection, discussion, study, prayer, meditation. But in a liberation-centered method of dialogue, such pursuits will not be done only in our separated religious camps but together. Having acted together, Buddhists and Christians and Muslims now reflect and talk together about their religious convictions and motivations. Here is where the partners in dialogue

47. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books and London: Burns and Oates, 1987), 23; Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books and London: SCM Press, 1973), II.

can enter into their scriptures and doctrines and explain not only to themselves but to others what it is that animates and guides and sustains them in their liberative praxis.

What has been the experience of Christian theology of liberation might well be realized in interreligious dialogue—that when we reflect on our religious heritage on the basis of a praxis of commitment to the poor and oppressed, we find ourselves “bringing forth new treasures” from old treasures; we see and hear and understand our scriptures and our doctrines with new eyes and a new heart. In a soteriocentric dialogue, this can happen interreligiously—we can understand each other’s scriptures and beliefs anew. Having heard and seen, for instance, how the Four Noble Truths⁴⁸ or the nirvanic experience⁴⁹ of *pratitya-samutpada*⁵⁰ are enabling and directing Buddhist partners in the transformation of village life in Sri Lanka, Christians can come to appreciate and appropriate such beliefs/experiences in genuinely new and fruitful ways. And Buddhists will better grasp the Kingdom of God or resurrection-faith of Christians having experienced how it sustains their efforts for justice or their readiness to risk.

This is how we might provide concrete substance for Tracy’s analogical imagination. Focusing our imaginations on how we can better cooperate in working for liberation and how we do so as different religious believers, we can better awaken to new *possibilities* in the amazingly different ways each of us is inspired and directed in our commitment to justice and life. As a Christian who shared Gandhi’s⁵¹ commitment to socio-political transformation, I can “imagine” more readily the new possibilities for *my* religious practice in the Gita’s⁵² challenge to “act without seeking the fruits of my actions.”

The base Christian communities of Latin America can serve as a practical model for carrying out a soteriocentric interreligious dialogue. In these small grass-roots gatherings, Christians have met to re-read their scriptures and their beliefs in light of their oppression and their efforts to overcome it—and in the process what had been a church of the *status quo* is experiencing new life and vision. In the interreligious encounter, what we can envision and what is already taking place in Asia are *base human communities*—communities which gather people not of one religious tradition but people of different religious beliefs who share *one commitment* to overcoming injustice and working with the oppressed.

48. The basic Buddhist teaching essential for achieving ultimate liberation.

49. The experience of the fading away of the Ego.

50. Sanskrit for “dependent origination, dependent arising,” a basic concept in Buddhism teaching that all things arise in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions.

51. Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), preeminent leader of the nonviolent Indian independence movement in British-ruled India that succeeded in 1947 with the establishment of the Republic of India. He inspired civil rights and freedom movements across the world.

52. The Gita refers to the Bhagavad Gita, the most popular Hindu scripture.

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In these communities, the same dynamic as that of the base Christian communities can and is taking place—scriptures are coming alive, doctrine makes sense, religious experience is deepened—between Buddhists and Christians and Hindus. Here is hope for a new form of interreligious dialogue, based on a *common conversion* to the poor and suffering.

And if the blood of martyrs is the seed of hope, we can expect ever greater life from these base human communities, for in Sri Lanka they have had their first martyr. In November 1987, Fr. Michael Rodrigo OMI, one of the most committed and successful promoters of base human communities of Christians and Buddhists, was murdered after celebrating mass with Sri Lankan villagers. His liberation-centered efforts and successes in promoting dialogue and peace between Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians stood in the way of those who preferred military solutions to Sri Lanka's divisions. His commitment to dialogue and justice remains an inspiration and a "dangerous memory."⁵³ . . .

53. Michael Rodrigo, "Buddhism and Christianity: Toward a Human Future—An Example of Village Dialogue of Life," paper presented at the Buddhist-Christian Conference, Berkeley, CA, August 1987.