INTER- OR *INTRA*-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE?

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Abstract: This paper was originally presented at the *Fethullah Gülen Conference*, St Patrick's Melbourne Campus, ACU, 15th-16th July 2009 and revised as *Conversation on Inter-religious Dialogue* for the Gold Coast Sea of Faith Public Lecture, 1st November 2009. It examines obstacles to dialogue especially between Christians and Muslims. Such obstacles arise from doctrinal differences as well as historical, cultural and political complexities. If interreligious dialogue is to succeed, it must not only deal with doctrinal issues, but create the circumstances in which people of diverse religious traditions may come to understanding (not necessarily agreement). For this, Raimon Panikkar suggests that a different kind of hermeneutic—what he calls "diatopical hermeneutics"—is required. Elements of this type of religious encounter include humility, empathy and hospitality—or what Panikkar calls *intra*-religious dialogue. These are examined in relation to Islamic-Christian dialogue.

Introduction

As has been often stated, religions don't dialogue ... people do. To speak of interreligious dialogue is to speak of an encounter between human subjects, not a comparison of doctrinal belief systems. In saying this, I am not suggesting that religious beliefs should be bracketed out of the equation—the phenomenological epoché.[1] Far from it. But I wish to emphasize that first and foremost dialogue is an event of intersubjective communication. Those involved in such dialogue are not simply intellectual beings but also spiritual, moral, bodily, affective creatures.

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[1] See Raimon Panikkar's critique of this position, entitled "Epoché in the Religious Encounter" in his revised *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York/ Mahwah NJ: Orbis Press, 1999).

Their identities have been formed by family, people, tribe, nation, culture, religion and, no doubt, the wider universe. These identities have also been formed in a history of relationship with—and too often conflict between—other peoples and traditions.

When it comes to dialogue between Christians and Muslims, there is a specific history, real and/or perceived, which engenders feelings of resentment, hurt and pain on both sides. In turn, this engenders fear and suspicion of the other which needs to be acknowledged and hopefully, in the context of dialogue, healed.[2] This is to say that reconciliation is an integral step—perhaps the first step—in the dialogical process. It also situates the dialogue as a spiritual event in which the justice, mercy and forgiveness of God are paramount. Human effort alone is inadequate; and the ongoing conversion of the dialogic partners becomes a focal point of the interreligious experience. I will return to this issue of conversion as a specific goal of Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Obstacles to Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is difficult, first and foremost, not because it is dialogue among adherents of diverse religions, but because it occurs between human beings. This is hardly a profound insight but as we watch the evening news and hear stories of Australian businessman Wu Stern in China, Aung San Su Chui in Burma, conflicts in

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[2] Tony Kelly captures this sensibility well when he states: "There is no need to pretend that the concrete situation in which the dialogue occurs is one of pristine innocence. It cannot but be affected by a backlog of hard feelings, resentments, hurts and conflicts. If there is no mutual acceptance in this domain of feeling, no genuine healing or progress can result. Each partner must be free to express they have been affected in a history of mutual wounding and blaming." Although commenting on interreligious relations in general, this has particular application to Christian-Muslim dialogue. See Anthony Kelly CSsR, "The Intentionality of Christian Dialogue" in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73 (2008), 276.

Iraq and Afghanistan, events in Somali, Dafour and Zimbabwe, world leaders debating climate change or our own parliamentarians in Canberra, we cannot help but think that human beings are not very good at dialogue. Certainly they are not very good at it when they represent governments or other institutions whose main focus and energy are often directed towards hanging onto power at whatever cost.

In this, religions are not so different. Whether we speak of Christianity in the West or Islam in the mid-East, we have to face the reality that we two religions, who together make up more than half of humanity, represent significant power-bases. Yes, we may have all kinds of internal divisions about what it is to be a Muslim or a Christian, but when we are confronted by the 'other'—non-Muslim or non-Christian—, we are easily threatened. And the feeling of threat is not a very good basis for entering into dialogue. Of course, this very division between West and East is geographically and otherwise simplistic. Christians have lived alongside Muslims in the East from the very beginning of Islam; and Muslims are now a significant and growing minority in so-called Western countries. Yet, this image of mutual threat so often hangs over the meeting of neighbours whether in Ankara or London, Baghdad or Melbourne.

This is one of the problems confronting us in interreligious dialogue. Do we come to the table of dialogue with a religious spirit—which represents gratitude to God and openness to one's neighbour—or do we come with not-so-hidden agendas based on threats and stereotypes? If so, there can be no true dialogue. The participants will not meet the

'other' but some 'false image' of the other which will serve only ongoing enmity and mutual suspicion.

The challenge of religious dialogue is compounded by other factors.[3] Perhaps the most serious of these is lack of grounding in one's own religious tradition. This has less to do with knowledge of doctrines than conversion of heart, mind and spirit—which is, after all, the objective of all religions. When faith is weak, then one's religious tradition becomes an ideology—and ideologies need to be defended by argument or stronger means. Another serious obstacle to dialogue is ignorance and misunderstanding of the beliefs and practices of the religious other. This is evident when Muslims refer to Christians as polytheists and idol-worshippers; or when Christians describe Islam as a demonic religion committed to holy war.[4]

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[3] The Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Interreligious Dialogue enunciates eleven specific obstacles to dialogue that can arise from a variety of human factors, including suspicion, intolerance, a polemical spirit, cultural and other differences. Here I focus only on the first two. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 52.
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_pro_20051996_en.html [Accessed 14th July 2008]

[4] In the words of Islamic scholar Mahmoud Ayoub: "In spite of the call for tolerance and respect towards the people of the Book, which the Qur'an frequently makes, Muslims have generally condemned Christians as polytheists. Since Islam came after Christianity and challenged some of its fundamental doctrines, Christians have likewise often condemned Islam as a religion inspired by the devil and Muslims as barbaric people without any moral or spiritual values." *Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Goals and Obstacles.*
http://macdonald.hartsem.edu/articles/mw943c.pdf [Accessed 14th July 2008].

In regard to the notion of *Jihad*, Muslim scholars point to the fact that the notion of 'holy war' does not exist in Islamic languages; and that *Jihad* means 'struggle in the way of God'. *Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI.*
http://www.duaatalislam.com/english_letter.htm [Accessed 14th July 2008]

However, I will dally no longer on these rather evident features of religious dialogue, and focus my attention on this idea of "diatopical hermeneutics" as a necessary feature of Christian-Muslim dialogue. In turn, this will suggest that *intra*-religious dialogue and conversion are the major goals of interreligious dialogue. I hope this will become clear in what follows.

Diatopical Hermeneutics and Dialogical Dialogue

If we take our national parliament as a model for dialogue we will not get very far. While I am prepared to agree with Churchill that democracies are the least worst forms of government, I do not pretend they proceed on the bases of dialogue. Their game is dialectics, argument, contrary positions and, where necessary, manipulation of the facts to favour the power basis from which one speaks. The recent Ute-gate affair might give us some insight into the lack of dialogue between government and opposition. If I may introduce Panikkar's phraseology, insofar as there is dialogue at all, it is 'dialectical' rather than 'dialogical'. It pretends to truth, but its deeper motivation is power and persuasion. No, the Australian parliament—nor for that matter the Australian Press Gallery—will not assist us very far if we are looking for a model of "dialogical dialogue"!

The term "dia-topical hermeneutics" was coined by Raimon Panikkar to deal with the challenge of interpreting across traditions ('*dia-topoi*', literally 'across places') that do not share a common cultural or religious worldview.[5] In terms of Christian-Muslim

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[5] Raimon Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 9. He states: "*Diatopical hermeneutics* stands for the thematic consideration of understanding the other

dialogue, one may object that we do share much in common: belief in the one God; importance of Abraham and the biblical prophets; day of judgment and the resurrection of the dead; practices of prayer, almsgiving and fasting. While all this is true, and many other examples of commonality between the traditions could be given, and should be celebrated, we also need to acknowledge from the outset that Christian and Islamic experience and belief are *sui generis*.

If I can put it this way: we each spring from vastly different *foundational events* in different historical times and cultural circumstances and based upon the interpreted lives and teachings of different religious founders. Our experience of the divine mystery is mediated through symbols, ritual practices and doctrines that relate us to these original, unique sacred events and so define our religious identities in distinctive and incomparable ways. Of course, even among themselves, Christians and Muslims interpret those events through distinct traditions (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant; Sunni and Shi'a). As we also know, there are significant cultural and ideological differences among adherents of any single broad tradition. However, when we are dealing with radically diverse foundational experiences at the heart of religious communities—and not just variations of interpretation within a single tradition—, then we certainly need to engage in diatopical hermeneutics.

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without assuming that the other has the same basic understanding as I have. The ultimate horizon, and not only different contexts, is at stake here." He describes *dialogical dialogue* in terms of "piercing the logos in order to reach the dialogical, translogical realm of the heart (according to most traditions), allowing for the emergence of a myth in which we may commune, and which will ultimately allow under-standing (standing under the same horizon of intelligibility".

Diatopical hermeneutics focuses on interpretation and communication across foundationally distinct traditions where there may be not only an absence of common understanding but a prevalence of mutual misunderstanding. For this reason, diatopical hermeneutics focuses on the symbol rather than the concept, on the person who believes rather than the content of belief. As Panikkar states, "what expresses belief, what carries the dynamism of belief ... is not the concept but the symbol".[6] If we were to imagine some future, hypothetical world in which there were no longer believing Muslims or Christians, one could still study the belief systems of what would then be 'dead religions'. But we could not engage in diatopical hermeneutics, because without the person who believes there would be no living symbols of those traditions to mediate their meaning or communicate their saving truth.

Consequently, diatopical hermeneutics privileges dialogue over dialectics. Its goal is truth—and, in the religious context, divine truth—, but its method focuses on existential encounter rather than argumentative discourse.

> Dialogue seeks truth by trusting the other, just as dialectics pursues truth by trusting the order of things, the value of reason and weighty arguments. Dialectics is the optimism of reason; dialogue is the optimism of the heart.[7]

This is not to suggest that dialectics and argument have no place in interreligious encounter. But it is to admit that the first task is to seek to understand the religious other as far as possible as the other understands him/herself. This is especially challenging

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[6] *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, 6.

[7] *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*, 243.

when we are dealing with foundationally distinct religious traditions such as Islam and Christianity—despite the recognized elements of commonality. It is especially here that diatopical hermeneutics becomes necessary. It also becomes possible when certain human-religious attitudes prevail in the encounter, namely, faith, hope and love.[8]

Interreligious Encounter in Faith, Hope and Love

The first is the existential attitude of faith which is never totally identified with particular beliefs, doctrines or theologies. These latter are vehicles through which religious faith is expressed; but the ultimate reality of religious faith is the mystery of God which no belief or doctrine pretends to capture. In a recent work, Catherine Cornille speaks of the need for "doctrinal humility" which, even in the revelation traditions of Christianity and Islam, is recognized especially in their apophatic and mystical traditions.[9] While Muslims and Christians articulate particular and diverse beliefs they are united in a truth that transcends all words and concepts—even when, in Christianity and Islam, those words are understood as revealed directly by God, respectively through Jesus Christ and the holy Qur'an. None of this is to suggest a relativistic attitude to one's religious beliefs, but to acknowledge the priority of religious faith. In terms of religious encounter, as Panikkar says, "beliefs divide; faith unites".[10]

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[8] Panikkar describes genuine interreligious dialogue as "a religious encounter in faith, hope and love". *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 69f.

[9] Catherine Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Herder & Herder / Crossroad, 2008), 31-42.

[10] "Faith and Belief: A Multireligious Experience" in *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 41ff.

The second existential attitude for dialogue is hope. Hope is at once a truly human and a profoundly religious attitude that enables us to overcome initial human obstacles and weaknesses that beset all religious (and human) encounters. Islam and Christianity are not only both historical religions—in the sense they understand God acting in the world through the events of human history—, but they are also profoundly eschatological religions. They are marching toward the future when the fullness of God's promises will be revealed. Each tradition expresses this in different words and concepts; and yet I assume that both traditions acknowledge the poverty of language to express the full reality of *moksha*, salvation, paradise or heaven. The importance of hope in relation to interreligious dialogue is captured by Tony Kelly who speaks of "inter-hope dialogue" precisely because it focuses the dialogue on the eschatological horizon.[11] This has particular applicability to Christian-Islamic dialogue because both traditions share an eschatological imagination.

The third existential attitude required for interreligious dialogue is the *sine qua non* of all genuine human encounter: love. In terms of Christian-Islamic encounter, I note the words of the Islamic scholars' letter to Pope Benedict in which they single out the two great commandments—love of God and love of neighbour (citing Mark 12: 29-31)—as common to "our shared Abrahamic tradition".[12] In a more general sense, love impels us toward our fellow human beings, leading us to discover in them what is lacking in us. As with faith and hope, love is oriented toward the common recognition of truth without downplaying

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[11] "Inter-hope dialogue evokes the unimaginable *otherness* of the eschatological experience." Anthony Kelly, *The Resurrection Effect* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2008), 171.

[12] *Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI.*

difference or eradicating the uniqueness and distinctiveness of any person or tradition. It also copes with contradictory systems of thought because it does not make these absolute.

By emphasizing these existential attitudes—one can think of others such as friendship, honesty, openness, commitment, empathy—,[13] the possibility of mutual learning and enrichment in religious encounter becomes real. I also note, in this context, the words of Fethullah Gülen in his address to the World Parliament of Religions, Capetown, 1999. While recognizing the tendency of humanity to become embroiled in conflict and war, too often over religious matters, and noting the manner in which pride, jealousy and arrogance destroy the human spirit, he also signals the reality of faith, hope and divine action spurring on genuine interfaith encounter:

> People live in perpetual hope, and thus are children of hope. At the instant they lose their hope, they also lose their 'fire' of life, no matter if their physical existence continues. Hope is directly proportional to having faith. . . . The gears of Divine acts revolve around such comprehensive wisdom and merciful purposes . . . .[14]

Intra-religious Dialogue / Conversion

All this is to say that interreligious dialogue is not a congress of philosophy nor a theological symposium—as helpful as these may be—but a genuine religious encounter in faith, hope and love.[15] For this, one must be well prepared through a deepened

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[13] See Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, which gives considerable attention to these existential attitudes.

[14] Fethullah Gülen, Address to the World Parliament of Religions, Capetown, 1999. http://en.fgulen.com/about-fethullah-gulen/messages/972-the-necessity-of-interfaith-dialogue-a-muslim-approach.html [Accessed 14 July 2008]

[15] See Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue,* 65-71.

commitment to one's own tradition and the opening of oneself to learn something from the other's tradition. This is where the focus on dialogue and symbol, rather than dialectics and doctrines, becomes important. Dialogue listens, observes and makes connections before it questions, corrects and disputes. Symbols, like the poetic word, are polyvalent: while they are rooted in a particular people's psyche, they are ever open to new, transformative meanings.

Viewing this from the Christian side, one thinks of the ninety-nine names for God in the Qur'an. The Christian understands God as Father, a rich symbol for divine love and mercy. In the context of dialogue, the Islamic names for God enrich his/her appreciation of what Fatherhood means: all-forgiving, bestower, forbearing, wise, strong, compassionate, merciful, provider, gracious, giver of all life, to name a few. There will, of course, come a point in the dialogue where questions will be asked of the way in which Christians understand God as Father, Son and Spirit while continuing to understand that God is indeed one. The mutual questioning will hopefully lead both partners of the dialogue to revise, examine and deepen their understanding, and especially their experience, of the one Divine mystery.

The term *intra*-religious dialogue refers to this internal depthing of one's faith that arises before, during and after the religious encounter. One does not have faith, one lives faith. Faith is forever changing, hopefully growing and deepening, as one continues on life's adventure. Viewed from a religious perspective, all our experiences, encounters and life-challenges have one aim: to lead us all to a deeper conversion towards God. Indeed, this

is the most important fruit of any genuinely interreligious encounter: the deepening of one's religious commitment and the purification of one's faith.[16] We do not simply dialogue with the religious 'other'; we also dialogue with ourselves and with the God who calls us in this moment of human history to know and love one another. As such, religious dialogue is part of life's existential adventure and a catalyst for our ongoing religious conversion.

Of course, this raises the question of the possibility of one being converted to another religious tradition. While this is an issue that needs to be squarely faced, it should not deter us from the existential adventure of life, nor the challenge of living in a multi-religious (and often anti-religious) world. Nor should it deter us from the challenge of living our lives in faith, hope and love through dialogue and communion with all people of good will. In reality, the largest danger to one's faith is not dialogue with others but inadequate grounding in one's own faith tradition.

Finally, perhaps, a word needs to be said about the relationship between dialogue and mission (Christian) or *da'wah* (Islamic)? To be brief, if conversion of the other to my religious tradition is an explicit goal of the dialogue, this is not genuine dialogue since the aim is not to understand and accept the other, let alone deepen my own faith through dialogue with the other, but the desire to absorb and assimilate them.[17] This is

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[16] The Vatican document, *Dialogue and Proclamation,* specifically recognizes that "in dialogue, Christians and others are invited to deepen their religious commitment" (no. 40).

[17] The distinction between dialogue and mission is developed by Mahmoud Ayoub in his *Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Goals and Obstacles.* This is also a major concern of the Vatican document, *Dialogue and Proclamation.*

unquestionably a particular issue for both Muslims and Christians who understand themselves as universal faiths for all humanity. Both traditions have their own ways of coming to terms with this tension. We are both learning something new about what it means to be faithful Muslims or Christians in the current world. My own belief is that it is in the adventure of dialogue with one another that we will each find our way of holding fast to our own traditions while recognizing the authenticity of one another's religious faiths.

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