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# Religion, religion! Wherefore art thou, religion? Enactment in interreligious encounters as walking the talk

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'Interfaith dialogue' is a term that generally assumes dialogue between different faiths. Much has been written about why, how and what form this dialogue should assume. Although many theories have been developed around this process, it remained theories and did not develop into praxis. Some of these theories include aspects of psychology, theology of religions, preconditions for dialogue, ethical theories, epistemology and even social constructs in relation to the economy, social justice and peace. In as much as these theories are important, and needed to be noted, the how to walk the talk in the encounters in interreligious dialogue is not often addressed. This article, therefore, addresses the 'enacting' element of interreligious encounters as human-to-human encounters in walking the talk. With the emphasis on human-to-human encounters, examples from history are considered to explicate these encounters and, finally, why the term 'interreligious dialogue' better expresses the human-to-human encounters than the term 'interfaith dialogue'.

**Keywords:** interfaith; interreligious; dialogue; faith; religion.

## Introduction

The first part of the title comes from the famous play by Shakespeare (2008:59), *Romeo and Juliet*, where Juliet exclaims, 'Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?' (Act II, Scene II). The question that Juliet actually asks Romeo here is something like this, 'Why do you have to be Romeo?' By saying this, and in the context of the conversation, Juliet is referring to the conflict that existed between her family, the Capulets and Romeo's family, the Montagues (Mabillard 2000).

In two stanzas later, Juliet goes on to say (Shakespeare 2008):

> Tis but thy name that is my enemy. Thou art thyself, though not a Montague. What's a Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face, nor any other part belonging to a man … (p. 59)

In this dialogue, Juliet is considering the difficulty of the challenges her love for Romeo exposed her to concerning their families. The correct interpretation of this stanza suggests that only the family name is her enemy. She does not see Romeo as her enemy. The emphasis here is the idea that the name of the family should not determine the humanness of the person. To relate this to religion is to suggest that religion is only a name given to a belief system ('a family', whether it includes a divine being or not), but behind this 'family' are human beings. In this regard, therefore, interreligious dialogue viewed this as an opportunity to reach the human being behind the religion. To this fact, the dictum 'religions don't dialogue, but humans do' is indeed very appropriate in this context. This is what Juliet is trying to encapsulate in her exclamation that 'I want to relate to you and not to who you belong to'. In the case of Romeo and Juliet, the name of their families became a serious challenge in their relationship with each other, and as much as they cared for each other, the challenges they faced eventually led to their demise.

The story of Romeo and Juliet may sound like a crude allegory used in this article, but the truths contained therein and the lesson learnt in interreligious dialogue are crucial. If, as an example, the encounter between Romeo and Juliet is substituted with Christianity and Islam, then the allegory from the story of Romeo and Juliet can be imported into the relationship between these two religions. As such, therefore, in order to dialogue, we must look beyond religion to the person, the human being, who embraces such a religion. The effects of religion on a human being should never be underestimated. It requires special focus and urgency for anyone engaging in

**Note:** HTS 75th Anniversary Maake Masango Dedication.

interreligious dialogue to have the ability to look beyond religious beliefs to be able to enact any form of a contribution to humanity that can contribute towards life in all its fullness.

Religion of itself is dead. Humans give it life. Marx's (1956:26) famous dictum that '[m]an makes religion, religion does not make man' describes religion as the projection of giving hope for a better world. Cognitive science enhances this idea of 'humans give religion life' by interpreting how religion may be construed as actions towards the cosmos. In this sense, Guthrie (2001:98) acknowledges that religious cognition and action do not differ from other modes of human cognition and action. Therefore, the implication of the cognitive approach is that, 'an understanding of religious thought and action must be based on a more general understanding of human thought and action' (Guthrie 2001:98). The feature of Guthrie's explanation in understanding religious thought and action as congruent with human thought and action finds expression in Darwin's claim of 'an organism may be understood to serve the organism's needs' (Guthrie 2001:98). For this reason, religion serves the need of the religious practitioner. Without the religious practitioner, religion is dead!

In a similar thought, Urubshurow (2009:6) suggests that, '[h]uman beings create religious symbols in response to perceiving something highly unusual and extraordinarily powerful'.

It is only in the translations and interpretations and the practice and beliefs by human beings that bring religion to life. Aside from the sacred texts, people are judged through the enactment of the teachings of religion, thereby exposing religion to scrutiny. It is therefore encumbered upon an individual to decide how to balance religious beliefs in interreligious encounters and the enactment in the praxis with other religions in the domain of and for the flourishing of life of humanity. There are platforms where religion-to-religion encounters can take place, such as scriptural reasoning and textual reasoning, among others. It is these dialogues that, as Wells (2018) explains:

> [P]oint to the central epistemological issue in interreligious dialogue: namely, authentic dialogue requires that we remain committed to the truth of our own tradition while being genuinely open to the truths of other traditions. (p. 26)

The intention in this article is the human-to-human encounter, more than the religion-to-religion encounter. It is at the human-to-human encounter where a new 'religion' is developed. Common in this encounter is human challenges in which we find similarities of concern and commonality for the good of humanity. Irrespective of which religion one belongs to, the challenges faced by all human beings in life are the same. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals prominently speak about this context. Religion as a dogmatic enterprise may provide moral engagements, but cannot provide the physical and material tangible remedies. Therefore, in interreligious encounters at the level of humanitarian concern, a strong emphasis on commonalities and agreements are enacted upon to foster hope for humanity.

Regarding the derivation of the meaning of my title, 'Religion, Religion! Wherefore art thou, Religion?', I am suggesting that the names given to religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity become stumbling blocks in interreligious dialogues because too much emphasis is put on the faith aspect of religion rather than the human being of that religion. Hall (2010) emphasises the fact that:

> 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 epochè  I wish to emphasise that first and foremost dialogue is an event of intersubjective communication. (p. 1)

The major encounter in interreligious dialogue, considering the above discussion, and in the context of this article, should not be focused purely on epistemological rationale. The dominant factor, in the enactment in interreligious encounters, should be walking the talk where human-to-human co-operation is required in addressing the affairs of human challenges.

## Walking the talk approaches

On occasions, the enactment of encounters in interreligious dialogues can become so complicated that the methodologies suggested can be more restraining than fluid. The intention of walking the talk approach in this article is a practical, unsophisticated approach to enactment in interreligious encounters. The element of walking the talk is to suggest that religious communities need to give substance to dialogue by expressing themselves in praxis. The types of dialogues expressed in this section do not consider the epistemological approach, although important, but the human-to-human approach that expresses the allegory of Romeo and Juliet.

Thangaraj (1999) proposes a new way of thinking about interreligious dialogue in his book. He opines that Christian mission must first be understood as 'the common task' of all humanity, the *missio humanitatis* (Thangaraj 1999:167). Connected hereto, he suggests the following four levels of interreligious dialogue (Thangaraj 1999:95, 96):

1. the dialogue of everyday life:
   a. the dialogue of courtesy, openness and neighbourly spirit, sharing each other's joy and sorrow
2. the dialogue of action:
   a.  working for the well-being of humanity
   b. to safeguard the rights of individuals
   c. to promote people's aspirations for happiness
   d. to protect nature
   e. to show solidarity with the victims of injustice
   f.  to struggle for peace and justice and liberation
3. the dialogue of theological exchange:
   a. When people participate in discussion in an effort to deepen their understanding of each other's religious traditions, ways of life and appreciate each other's spiritual values
4. the dialogue of religious experience:

a. when people rooted in their own spiritual traditions can share their spirituality by explaining how they pray, what their beliefs are, how they search for God, as well as what their religious practices are.

Each of the enactments indicated above reveals no threats to subjects that may be participants in these encounters. Even the last two dialogues do not enter into the field of epistemology, which can have the potential to develop into a debate rather than a dialogue. Each of these enactments strongly portrays the human-to-human interreligious encounter.

There are rules for these forms of engagement which all must accept and abide by. Other types of interreligious encounters, over and above these four, can be expanded, but it at least gives one a sense of what areas one can focus on in interreligious encounters.

## The roots and wings phenomenon

The phenomenon of 'roots and wings' is taken from an article by Kritzinger (2008). In the context of this article, the enactment of interreligious dialogue at the human-to-human encounter for the human flourishing of life is evident. According to Kritzinger (2008:788), '[u]nderlying the ecumenical intention … is the paradoxical attitude of "roots and wings", which suggest that mature human beings … are able to affirm their roots while spreading their wings …'. This idea of roots and wings is associated with the concept that 'roots' suggests 'belonging to a place' and 'wings' suggests 'exploration of space' (Duhn 2014:225).

Kruger, Lubbe and Steyn (2009:6, 7) attempted to explain a workable definition of religion in terms of roots and wings. The idea of religion, expressed in terms of root, is explained as those phenomena, wherein a person finds salvation in and amidst social catastrophes. The idea of wings is explained as the experience of constantly expanding with the ever-increasing boundaries of religion and not being confined to 'temples, initiation rites, holy books and the like' (Kruger et al. 2009:7).

The intention of this idea of 'roots and wings' is that, if one is rooted in religion, which encompasses beliefs, history, customs and traditions, one can have wings to fly in order to learn, engage and participate in ideologies different from one's own without having to sacrifice or be removed from one's roots. This imagery bodes well in the human-to-human interreligious encounter and discounts any fear of possible capitulation to another faith, which is one of the fears in interreligious dialogue. One therefore has the freedom of expanding boundaries in the walk the talk phenomenon of human-to-human encounters for the benefit of humanity without fear.

Finally, I want to use the analogies that reflect true solidarity when you encounter other human beings, not at a religion level, as addressed earlier, but at the human level of common humanity. The first two are analogies from marriage, which

I have adapted for explaining how interreligious enactment in dialogue needs to be executed:

1. **The face-to-face encounter** – Be exposed to each other – nothing to hide. Be vulnerable in a good way. There should be no power dynamics (whether of an economic, intellectual, political or even religious nature). In face-to-face dialogue, you engage with integrity and honesty.

2. **The shoulder-to-shoulder encounter** – Facing life challenges together. Express solidarity and willingness to support each other facing the adversities that affect humanity.

3. **The back-to-back encounter** – What are people saying about the other religion in my community or even what colleagues are saying in society. In face-to-face and shoulder-to-shoulder encounters, honesty, integrity and solidarity are demonstrated. In back-to–back encounter, I cannot see or hear what you are saying or doing in your community once we are apart because we return to our communities. The question arises whether I can still maintain my face-to-face and shoulder-to-shoulder postures even when we return to our different religious communities.

4. **The back-to-front encounter** – Even though we may not be of the same faith or practise the same religion, but because you have the expertise and skill in a particular field I am prepared to follow you for the benefit of humanity because I see honesty, integrity and sincerity in your leadership.

The third part of this article will briefly engage the idea of substituting the term 'interfaith dialogue' with the term 'interreligious dialogue'. This section briefly turns to the historical development[1] of attempts made to further peace and understanding between religions. This turn to history also demonstrates the strong association with the more important human-to-human encounters and is considered in order to situate the idea of interreligious dialogue as a more appropriate term than 'interfaith dialogue'.

## Historical development

The purpose of this section is to understand how interreligious encounters developed throughout recorded history. Inasmuch as the interreligious dialogue can be formally understood to have been established in September 1893 (Marshall 2015) at the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, traces of such endeavours are evidenced in much earlier times. It may not have had the intended outcomes of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, but the intention of getting other religions together to express itself was evident. Although there are indicators of interreligious encounters, like dialogues that claimed to have taken place much earlier than the two events to be addressed in this article, these earlier indicators were seen as insufficient and inconcrete evidence to warrant inclusion in this article.

1.Inasmuch as it is not recognised as interfaith dialogue, there are instances in history where attempts were made to bring religions together for the purpose of understanding other religions for the sake of peace.

I will begin to focus on two incidences of two characters in history that brought religions together. Following this discussion, I will address the objectives of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions.

## King Ashoka Mauryan (304–232 BCE)

Here I want to refer to King Ashoka Mauryan who was the third king of the Mauryan Dynasty and ruled for 36 years from 268 BCE to 232 BCE. Ashok ascended the throne of the Mauryan Empire (modern-day India) about 273 BCE, but his coronation only took place in 269 BCE. He ruled at a time when Buddhism, Jainism and Ajiviksim opposed the domination of Brahmanism. He also had to address problems in other areas of his kingdom, which were not associated with any of these heterodox religions. In order to address these societal problems, a common approach was needed. As a result, he formulated the principles of dharma, which emphasised tolerance of people, including servants, obedience to elders and supporting the needy. He also pleaded for tolerance of different religious sects for the purposes of peace and harmony.

He is best known for his 'royal edicts and rock inscriptions engraved on cliff faces and stone pillars all over his empire' (Strong 2008:3). In these edicts, he refers to himself as 'Beloved-of-the-lord, King Piyadasi'. These edicts, which were scattered in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan, were written on rocks and stone pillars. It is believed that, since the 17th century CE, 150 edicts were found. These edicts were classified into (1) minor rock edicts, (2) minor pillar edicts, (3) major rock edicts and (4) major pillar edicts. According to Strong (2008:5), James Prinsep only deciphered the edicts in 1837, even though it is believed that the edicts were inscribed on these surfaces in the 3rd century BCE.

Of interest, and for the purpose of this article, the sixth edict (found on the major pillar edict) and the 12th edict (found on the major rock edict) are important. The latter part of the sixth edict reads, '… I have honored all religions with various honours. But I consider it best to meet people personally' (Nikam & McKeon 1959:60).

In this sixth edict, Mauryan, inasmuch as he sees the importance of respecting and honouring different religions, he wanted to meet people personally. Could it be that he wanted to look beyond the religion to the person, the human being, behind the religion? Nevertheless, Mauryan reflects two important principles in interreligious dialogue: (1) respect and honour for all religions and (2) human-to-human contact. This is indeed a plausible effort and an example to behold.

The second reference is to the 12th edict. This is rather a long quote, but this edict reflects the importance of acknowledging other religions through respect and valuing the good, which should be an essential characteristic of all religions. The 12th edict is as follows (Nikam & McKeon 1959):

> Beloved-of-Gods. King Piyadasi honors both ascetics and the householders of all religions, and he honors them with gifts and honors of various kinds. But Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi does not value gifts and honors as much as he values this – that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religions of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other religions for this reason. By so doing, one's own religion benefit[s] and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religions of others. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion and condemns others with the thought 'Let me glorify my own religion', only harms his own religion.
>
> Therefore contact between religions is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi desires that all should be well learned in good doctrines of other religions. Those who are content with their own religions should be told this: Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honors as much as he values that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. (p. 51)

This 12th edict is construed as one of the first written references to interreligious dialogue. He covers many basic approaches to dialogue and also the need to see the essentials of all religions grow. It was not his intention to consider one religion above the other as being better epistemologically, but rather the practical evidence, which religions should portray. This is evident also in the idea espoused by Kritzinger (1995:368) that, '[e]very religious community … is concerned about its public image and credibility'. Although he stated this in the understanding that every religion 'is potentially or incipiently missionary', the reference he makes is the idea that people generally are concerned about how others view their own religion.

Although Mauryan understood the need for people to familiarise themselves with other religious beliefs and practices, it is evident that he valued religion at the human-to-human encounter, more than the religion-to-religion encounter.

## Emperor Abdu'l-Fath Jalal ud-din Muhammad Akbar (1542–1605 CE)

Akbar, who was the third Mughal emperor and one of the most famous emperors in Indian history, governed India from 1556 CE to 1605 CE (Garbe 1909:163). According to Garbe (1909:161–163), India was invaded in 1000 CE by Sultan Mahmud of Ghasna, which began a reign of terror that continued under subsequent Muslim rulers. Although not all rulers were violent in their reign in the 700 years they ruled India, it was Akbar, who assumed the throne in 1556, who began to bring about peace and harmony. According to Muller (cited in Garbe 1909), Akbar was:

> [T]he only prince grown up in the Mohammedan creed whose endeavor it was to ennoble the limitation of this most separatistic of all religions into a true religion of humanity. (p. 165)

He was curious about religions and encouraged dialogue amongst religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Parsis and

Christians. He even participated in the festivals of other faiths (Mukherjee 2004:14).

In 1575, Akbar built a walled city known as Fatehpur Sikri. Here he built a temple. At this temple, he invited scholars from other religions. He brought together yogis, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian scholars together. He never forbade the Jesuits from building a church in Agra. He even discouraged the slaughter of cattle because of the religious significance that Hinduism attaches to cattle.

In 1579, a declaration was issued that granted Akbar the authority to interpret religious law. This was soon developed and became known as the 'Infallibility Decree', and it thus gave Akbar the ability to create an interreligious state. This led to him establishing the *Din-i-Ilahi* [divine faith] which combined elements of many religions including Islam, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism (Ballhatchet 2019).

Akbar was set on developing a culture of tolerance and pro-existence amongst people of his kingdom. This did not necessarily include epistemology, which did linger in the background, as the basis for such interreligious enactment. Although Akbar considered the different religions that existed in India at that time, he was also concerned about the human-to-human relationship, which led him to be very sincere in developing a holistic approach to interreligious enactment.

# The World Parliament of Religions (1893)

The gathering of different religions in Chicago from the 11 to 27 September 1893 was recognised as the cradle of the interfaith movement. As the Parliament began, the chairperson of the Parliament, John Henry Barrows, who was a Presbyterian minister, opened with these words (Feldman 1967):

> … We are not here as Baptists and Buddhists, Catholics and Confucians, Parsees and Presbyterians, Methodists and Moslems; we are here as members of a Parliament of Religions, over which flies no sectarian flag. (pp. 184–185)

If this statement by Barrows is considered, it could mean that the intention is to suggest that there will be no religion that will have dominance nor will the Parliament of Religions favour any sectarian promulgation of any of the religions gathered at this event. In this, as well as the ensuing section below, this statement offers the reader a sense of an epistemological approach in religious interaction. It also suggests a human-to-human interreligious encounter, where the well-being of humanity is addressed as an interreligious enactment.

The outcomes of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions agreed on 10 objectives (Barrows 1893:18). Three of these objectives listed below lend support to the dictum that 'Religions don't dialogue, but humans do':

1. … how many truths the various religions hold and teach in common

2. to promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood…
3. to bring the nations of the earth into a more friendly fellowship, in the hope of securing permanent international peace.

Thus far, in the historical approach to interreligious encounters, it may be confirmed that, in all three instances, the element of interreligious enactment was prominent and none explicitly forced the notion of an epistemological approach as the basis for interreligious dialogue. There has been a strong indication that the human-to-human enactment was prominent in the historical examples listed above.

# Interfaith dialogue or interreligious dialogue?

The last section of this article will address the terminologies most suitable for encounters, in the context argued so far in this article. The opening remark in this article is of interest here. One needs to come to the table of religion encounters and not as faith encounters in religions. Even though faith encounters in religion is important, human-to-human encounters (Hall 2010) must be considered. Interreligious dialogue is an encounter firstly between human subjects and not immediately comparing and engaging in doctrines of belief systems.

I am not in the least suggesting that doctrines of belief systems should be bracketed out of the equation, as *phenomenological epochè*, but to emphasise that, primarily, dialogue is an event of intersubjective communication. This form is considered as the communication between separate conscious minds. In the allegory, as introduction to this article, Juliet never for once suggested that Romeo deny who he is or his ancestry, but she did see the bigger picture, in that she wants to engage with Romeo, the human being. The emphasis here is on the human-to-human engagement, as being the greater good.

A definition of faith and religion is necessary to substantiate the use of a better term for an inclusive engagement with all religious traditions. These definitions will assist in determining whether the term 'interfaith' or 'interreligious' is the more appropriate terminology that expresses an inclusive character, especially in the context of this article.

According to Mackenzie, Falcon and Rahman (2009:5), the term 'interfaith' was coined around 1965 and 1970. They agree that the terms 'interreligious' and 'interfaith' are used interchangeably (Mackenzie et al. 2009:6). Therefore, the question of which terminology best suites the purposes of the human-to-human encounter, as addressed in this article, is now considered.

Inasmuch as the terms 'interfaith' and 'interreligious dialogue' are used interchangeably, the difference is in the actual understanding of what faith and religion are. Firstly, the term 'interfaith' presupposes faith-based affiliates where a divine being or a supernatural power is prominent and

where faith is personal. According to Hellwig (1990:3), the term 'faith' 'ranges in meaning from a general religious attitude on the one hand to personal acceptance of a specific set of beliefs on the other hand'. Newman (2004:106) supports this notion by stating that, 'faith is the guiding principle by which individuals are either religious or spiritual. Faith serves as both the source and the target of their religion or spirituality'. When these two statements are considered, the deduction is that faith is about 'knowing' and religion is about 'doing'. Religion, therefore, allows faith to gain expression via worship, rituals and practices. This practice of religion is generally directed towards a supernatural entity.

Therefore, 'religion' is the term wherein faith has an expression in whatever form it deems best by an individual. As such, religion is regarded as an inclusive entity. If faith is seen as the 'knowing' element and religion as the 'doing' element, wherein faith find its expression, then it stands to reason that with the absence of faith, religion can still exist. Therefore, religion does not need the faith element to exist.

The term 'interfaith dialogue' should be reconsidered if we are trying to create space for dialogue in an inclusive plural society where the idea of faith, as defined above, is not a necessary component of religion. I want to suggest that consideration should be given to a name that is more inclusive, such as 'interreligious dialogue'. This will then be inclusive of both faith traditions and non-faith traditions.

There are people in society who do not believe in a divine being but with whom we need to dialogue for the common good of humanity. Orton (2016) completed a study on approaches to interfaith dialogue, which included theoretical questions concerning the involvement of those interested in interfaith dialogue. On the question of who is involved in interfaith dialogue, and based on research, Orton (2016) states that, participation in interfaith dialogue may be extended to those with:

> [A]theistic or gnostic worldviews, or with more diverse and fluid forms of religious identity … and that they sometimes (often unintentionally) exclude humanists … and other 'lifestance' communities which often did not see themselves as religious in nature. (pp. 353–355)

The worlds of the atheist, humanist and gnostic are regarded as religious even though the idea of a supernatural being is non-existent. It is with due consideration of a pluralistic society without the element of faith that 'interreligious dialogue' becomes a more attractive term than 'interfaith dialogue'. Hence, the 'enactment' of human-to-human encounters finds more commonality through the idea of interreligious dialogue as being an inclusive term than interfaith dialogue. It could very well be also that the walk the talk element finds greater cohesion and assurance within the term 'interreligious' as in interfaith dialogue.

## Conclusion

This article set out to highlight the walk the talk element in encounters in interreligious dialogue, which was deemed to be seldom addressed in interreligious encounters. The 'enacting' element of interreligious encounters, as human-to-human encounters in walking the talk, found expression in the allegory of *Romeo and Juliet*. The article also referred to three historical examples of interreligious encounters, where the essence of human-human and walk-the-talk elements was predominant. A substantive argument for an alternate inclusive terminology was proposed. This terminology supported the inclusive nature of incorporating multi-religions, as well as those that are not considered as faith-based religions, to be included under the umbrella of interreligious dialogue. The term 'interfaith' is not considered an incorrect term, but there is more congruency and association with the term 'interreligious', which gives greater association with walk the talk in the human-to-human encounter. In this way, I eliminate all barriers which religion puts up as obstacles to dialogue, but which at the same time must be inclusive rather than exclusive.

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