

A Christian Theology of Interreligious Dialogue

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IT HAPPENED at a recent interreligious gathering. At the other end of the building, in the meditation room, some members of our group were learning Zen techniques while the rest of us sat in the Gothic chapel waiting for mass to begin.

Suddenly a commotion broke out in the chancel. A Catholic priest from Tibet had grabbed the microphone and was shouting something about Jesus Christ being the "only way, the truth and the life!" A couple of other priests chased him around, trying to grab the microphone. Then two men leaped out of the pews and joined the melee. I thought to myself, "Yes, now I see that religious wars are possible."

When the attackers found they couldn't bodily throw the interloper out without losing every sense of dignity and decorum, the presiding priest asked us all to leave and announced that mass would be held in another room. He was hoping that the self-appointed orator would lose his audience. Most left. I stayed, and so did a dozen others. We listened to the priest's impassioned rebuke. We were selling out our Christian faith, he said. The very fact that we were conversing with "Buddhist idolators" was evidence that we had lost our commitment to the Christ of God "who alone can bring us out of darkness into the light." To conclude, he bowed and prayed for our souls.

This dramatic episode reminded me of the pressing need for a coherent theology of interreligious dialogue. As a Christian theologian who has recently engaged in some in-depth dialogues with representatives of Hinduism

and Buddhism, I am convinced that something important and valuable takes place in such conversations. And I believe that in the long run these conversations will have a wholesome impact on the life of the Christian church, and perhaps on the non-Christian traditions as well. Yet it is still not clear what exactly we are doing and why. In time, each religious tradition may come up with its own justification for interreligious dialogue based upon its own particular confessional posture; but in the meantime, it would not hurt for Christian theologians to start working on the question.

There are three different positions from which one might approach interreligious dialogue. The first is *confessional exclusivism*. This would seem to be the position taken by our renegade Tibetan priest. According to this view, once one confesses one's faith in the centrality of Jesus Christ and the absoluteness of the divinely inspired revelation in him, the religious insights of non-Christian traditions cannot be seriously considered. Acknowledging Jesus Christ as "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) means believing that there is nothing of genuine value in other sources. Hence, interreligious dialogue appears to be at best something useless, and at worst something that leads Christians astray, contaminating the elusive truth with alien lies. One is not likely to find a confessional exclusivist participating in such a dialogue—except, of course, to disrupt it.

Another current theology of interreligious dialogue, found especially in the writings of John Hick and Paul Knitter, is one I call *supra-confessional universalism*. A century ago Ramakrishna propounded a version of supra-confessional universalism when he argued that all the religions of the world constitute different roads up the

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same mountain. In Hick's view, religions are different roads to the same center, the Godhead. As the titles of Hick's *God Has Many Names* and Knitter's *No Other Name?* suggest, these authors argue that the one transcendent divine reality is partially revealed in Christianity and similarly revealed under different names in the non-Christian religions as well. It is this conviction that makes their position supra-confessional.

Supra-confessional universalists object to Jesus' remark, "No one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6), and they are bothered by St. Peter's affirmation of Jesus' uniqueness: "There is salvation in no other name under heaven" (Acts 4:22). People belonging to non-Christian religions find these assertions offensive, say Hick and Knitter, and their offense allegedly prevents genuine dialogue. To cultivate interreligious conversation, they suggest, Christians should abandon their claim for the centrality of Christ and affirm instead something like "the Godhead." This proposal creates a problem, of course, for from the point of view of the Christian, it is the confession of the centrality and lordship of Jesus Christ that makes Christianity what it is.

I certainly applaud the attempt by scholars such as Hick and Knitter to foster a dignified dialogue characterized by mutual respect. But there are some weaknesses in the supra-confessional universalist position. First, its upholders are presumptuous. How do they know that all the various religious traditions in fact possess partial revelations of a single divine reality? One way to find out would be to engage in dialogue to see if others do indeed believe in the same divine reality in which Christians do. This would take time and patience and the development of shared understanding. But the philosophers of religion take a shortcut: they simply posit that all religions share in the same divine reality. In effect, they make dialogue unnecessary.

A second, related problem with this position is that it belongs to no actual religious tradition but rather to the philosophy of religion, which sees itself standing above and beyond the insights of those who confess specific religious beliefs. Instead of following the particular road of Hinduism or Christianity up the mountain, the supra-confessionalists reach the mountain in an intellectual helicopter.

Finally, by asking the Christian partners in the conversation to give up their confessional stance, the supra-confessionalists de-Christianize Christianity, thereby dissolving the very dialogue they wish to promote. Without someone representing the authentic Christian tradition, any dialogue that takes place is not a dialogue with Christianity.

I SUGGEST a third approach to interreligious dialogue—*confessional universalism*. This position affirms the claims of the Christian faith but is open to the insights of other faiths. It is confessional, because it affirms the gospel of Jesus Christ as borne through history by the Christian tradition. It is universal in two ways:

first, because it regards its claims as ultimate (valid for all people of all times and all places), and second, because it believes that there is more truth to be learned and that dialogue has the potential for expanding our understanding.

The confessional-universalist model permits Christian conversants to remain Christian, to retain their confession of the centrality of Jesus Christ. It avoids pre-empting the dialogue by making an appeal to an already posited divine reality, which allegedly stands behind, under or at the as-yet unrecognized "center" of each of the distinctive historical religions. We do not know in advance if non-Christian religions have the same center that Christianity does. We must await conversation to find out. To make such an assumption might prevent our listening carefully to each other.

Confessional universalism also helps to defuse the tendency toward christological imperialism. To be confessional is to recognize that what one says comes from one's own point of view. A confession is relative and perspectival. It encourages us, as H. Richard Niebuhr advised in *The Meaning of Revelation*, to proceed "by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view."

This position may appear similar to the hermeneutics of praxis proposed by Knitter in the final chapter of his excellent book *No Other Name?* There Knitter suggests that Christians should take a Christian stance and let the dialogue lead where it will. Yet he then takes the unnecessary if not contradictory step of affirming hypothetically—prior to dialogue—"the possible truth in all religions," and says that "there is a common ground and goal for all religions." I do not disagree with these

Watching

for Rachel

Everywhere you are growing.
As you sleep your body sprouts
curves and your bedroom more
mirrors for contemplation and berating
your parents for a nose that comes down
too far on your face. You are taken
particularly with purple these days
the color of my grandmother and the violets
she raised in her house in Ohio. The picture
on my wall has her outside the window
with Irish lace curtains, looking at something
far down the street. She seems puzzled
and stiff like the hollyhocks behind her. As you
slam the front door in your tight purple sweater,
she shakes in her frame.

Joan Rohr Myers.

hypotheses, but I do fear that they may prevent us from letting the actual dialogue carry us whither it will.

The confessional-universalist model suggests certain conditions and procedures for making interreligious dialogue meaningful and fruitful.

First, each party to the dialogue should have a position to put forth. If at the outset everyone agrees with one another regarding ultimate truths, or if the parties so waffle in their commitments that the issues are blurred or lost, the result may be a pleasant conversation, but it will not be a real dialogue.

Second, conversants should be genuinely disposed to listen sympathetically to the position being advanced by the representatives of the other religious traditions. We must, in principle, be open to the possibility that there is validity in what our rivals claim. For Christians, this means asking whether or not we have sufficient reason for confessing the lordship and centrality of Jesus Christ. To ask this question means not that we give up what we believe at the outset, but that we are willing to respond honestly to questions about the foundations of our faith. Dialogue requires a willingness to be persuaded that reality might not be exactly what we thought, and that there could be some truth for us yet to learn.

INTERRELIGIOUS dialogue should not, then, be based on the model of a labor-management negotiation. Such a negotiation has two parties in the conversation, to be sure, but it is an adversarial one. The parties in a labor-management negotiation approach the table representing solely the interests of their side. They assume that there is a finite pie of financial wealth, and that each side wants the biggest slice it can get. Neither side sees any gain in losing.

Dialogue, by contrast, is not adversarial; and, ironically, losing can be winning. The spiritual pie is infinite in the wealth it offers the human soul. If “losing” means having to give up one’s previous position in favor of a new and better insight, then it results in a net gain of knowledge and understanding, and perhaps even a strengthening of faith.

Third, genuine dialogue requires the disposition of love. We need to impute integrity to those representing the other traditions. To do so is a gesture of love. It is also the first step toward building a relationship, which can lead to developing a community of respect and understanding. Love leads to a genuine enjoyment of sharing, and elicits the hope of affirming some degree of unity.

It sparks the desire to see the other partners in the discussion become edified.

Fourth, we need sufficient time and stamina to discuss matters in depth and with thoroughness. Bantering about forms and practices, with each side feigning interest in the trivia of ethnic and religious traditions, is less than genuine dialogue. Time and energy must be given for claims and counterclaims regarding the pillars of each position to be explicated, analyzed, criticized, rationally defended and discussed again. This is the process that can carry us beyond the confines of our original contexts and demonstrate that human reasoning is a historical, growing and therefore liberating force. It is by no means necessary that everyone agree with everyone else’s religious claims; the net result of the process will still be an expanded horizon of shared understanding. Depth and thoroughness of discussion are necessary to mine the dialogue for its precious jewels of community expansion and enrichment.

The etymology of the word *dialogue* is instructive on this point. *Logos*, of course, is the Greek word for word or conversation. The prefix *di*, attached to such words as *dipolar*, means “two,” and it might seem obvious that a dialogue is a conversation between two parties. But a closer look reveals that the prefix is *dia*, not *di*. *Dia* is the Greek preposition meaning “through” or “throughout.” We should think of a dialogue, then, as a conversation in which we talk a subject through, exhaust its details, nuances and implications, and draw out its full significance.

Some Christians may think these suggestions regarding openness may compromise our commitment to the centrality and universality of the truth revealed by God through Jesus Christ. They may fear that we will learn new truths that change our minds.

Yes, it is quite likely that dialogue will change our minds. But there is absolutely nothing to fear on this score. If the God in whom we believe is in fact the creator and reconciler of the cosmos, then there is no truth—if it be genuine truth and not just partisan propaganda—that we could ever learn that could possibly lead us away from God. “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” says Jesus (John 14:6). If our faith is in the truth, and if we have with us the “Spirit of truth” (I John 5:7), then we can converse in the confidence that nothing we discover as truth can but edify our souls. It is with this confidence that Christians can enter into interreligious conversation. ■



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