

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

This article presents an insider's perspective on interreligious dialogue which follows the pastoral circle proposed by Holland and Henriot. Anecdotes from experiences of dialogue constitute the element of 'insertion', whereas the element of 'analysis' is represented by a classificatory matrix combining the concept 'emotional distance' with the well-known threefold distinction between exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. The elements of 'theological reflection' and 'pastoral planning' are dispersed throughout the article. The bulk of this article consists of a discussion of interreligious dialogue as a relationship of face-to-face 'encounter', shoulder-to-shoulder 'co-operation' and back-to-back 'truthfulness'.

1. Introduction

1.1 Theological method

Interreligious dialogue is one form of human interaction among many others. As such it can be described and analysed by means of the tools of the social sciences. In Christian theological approaches to dialogue this usually does not happen. The focus of a 'theology of religions' is often limited to doctrinal questions (see below), but if one wants to reflect meaningfully on the problems and perspectives of interreligious dialogue, one needs a theological method which can hold together not only text and context, but also theory and praxis. Or, put differently, a theological method to integrate human experience, social analysis, reflection on the Bible, and practical planning for action. In this paper I follow the broad outlines of the theological method proposed by Holland and Henriot (1984) as a way of setting in motion such a 'pastoral-hermeneutical circle.'

This paper will therefore contain anecdotes from personal experiences of dialogue (representing Holland and Henriot's dimension of *insertion*), elements of *social analysis* to uncover the dynamics of interreligious relations, a dimension of *theological reflection*, and some comments on future action (*planning*). These phases or dimensions of theology will not be placed neatly one after the other in a pedantic way, but will interpenetrate and overlap. This is an insider's (or 'emic') perspective on interreligious dialogue; and, as Schreier (1985:57) has pointed out, insider's perspectives are often more narrative than analytical in nature.¹

1.2 Emotional distance

For the dimension of social analysis I have made use of some social scientific tools, which I need to explain briefly. The first is an 'emotional distance' scale used by the Dutch theologian Wim Overdiep (1985) in his book on Christian approaches to 'the enemy.' Overdiep (1985:31) gives a helpful diagram to illustrate 'emotional distance' in five types of

1 My initial experience of dialogue was mainly with Hindus and Muslims in the former 'Indian Group Areas' of Gauteng, but more recently also with followers of other religious traditions in the context of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP-SA).

interhuman relationships: with friends, enemies, colleagues, opponents and strangers. The closer people are to each other in the diagram, the more emotionally laden is their relationship:

This means that the people who are emotionally the closest together are *friends* and *enemies*. Slightly further away on this emotional scale are *colleagues* and *opponents*, and furthest away emotionally are *strangers*, who literally 'leave you cold.' This is a helpful tool to analyse different Christian approaches to people of other religions, to complement the well-known three-fold distinction between exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.² The latter set of distinctions, which has dominated the debate in the 'theology of religions,' focuses on questions of Christology and soteriology ('Is Jesus the only Saviour?'),³ revelation ('Can people know God without having heard the message of the Bible?'),⁴ and sometimes pneumatology ('Is the work of the Holy Spirit work always directly linked to that of Jesus Christ?').⁵

These are very important theological questions, but when one has decided in which theological 'model' a person belongs, that is still no clear indication of how that person will relate to people of another faith in a concrete situation. Lochhead (1988) has made a significant contribution to the debate by suggesting that it is more relevant to construct *ideologies of interfaith encounter* than *models of soteriological theory*. He suggests the ideologies of *hostility, isolation, competition, partnership and dialogue*, with each of these containing its theological arguments to substantiate it.

However, the set of theological models (exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism) is too important to be replaced altogether, especially as a teaching tool. So to bring the dimensions of insertion and social analysis ('ideology' in Lochhead's terms) into the equation, I suggest that another 'axis' be added, to produce a two-dimensional diagram. For the left hand axis I use the 'emotional distance' categories of Overdiep, which I mentioned above. The different combinations of theological theory and interfaith interaction that are produced include all of Lochhead's ideologies and a few others besides. This approach, which is merely a development of that of Lochhead, attempts to 'map out' the whole field of interfaith interaction.⁶

Any diagram like this has its weaknesses. The first is that it remains caught in the modernist desire to label and classify, thus enthroning the scholar as a virtually omnipotent subject who makes other people into 'objects' by putting them into 'boxes.' To avoid such abuse of power and the 'paralysis of analysis' which it (ironically) produces, it is important to see the diagram only as a strategy which 'clears the ground.' It does this by establishing a

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- 2 This threefold set of models has become commonplace in the theology of religions due to the influence of the seminal work by Race (1983), which was followed by D'Costa (1986), Barnes (1989) and many others. A number of scholars prefer to work with a fourfold division (e.g. Knitter 1985, Bosch 1991).
 - 3 The Christological and soteriological focus of the debate is already clear from the titles of some of the books in the field: *No other name?* (Knitter 1985), *Is Christ the only way?* (Heim 1985), *No other name* (Sanders 1991), *Is Jesus the only Savior?* (Nash 1994), etc.
 - 4 This is a major issue for Knitter (1985), who splits the exclusivist model into the 'conservative evangelical' and 'mainline Protestant' models, primarily to distinguish between theologians who affirm general revelation and those who don't.
 - 5 This question surfaced especially in the Baar Statement of the Sub-unit on Dialogue of the World Council of Churches (WCC 1991). Khodr (1981), Knitter (1991) and Dupuis (1991:152ff) have also developed the implications of pneumatology for the theology of religions.
 - 6 It is possible to use other sets of categories from the social sciences that deal with 'social distance' or social interaction on the vertical axis of the diagram. What made Overdiep's set of categories appealing to me was the fact that he had already applied it to *religious* interaction.

vocabulary and delineating existing theologies (Schreiter 1985), in order to set the scene for new constructive theologising.

A second weakness of the diagram is that it creates the impression that the labels apply only to the blocks on which they are placed. For example, one could get the impression that dialogue only occurs in the approaches of Blocks A4, A5, B4 and B5, or that ethnocentrism is found only in Blocks C1 and C2. This is a false impression, since the label intends to express only *the most characteristic feature* of the particular approach, not every aspect of it.

THEOLOGICAL THEORIES ON SALVATION PATTERNS OF INTERFAITH ENCOUNTER	A EXCLUSIVISM (salvation only through knowing Christ)	B INCLUSIVISM (salvation through the cosmic work of Christ)	C PLURALISM (salvation possible in any religion)
1. ENEMIES (= ENCOUNTER AS THREAT)	A1. HOSTILITY (attacks to destroy falsehood)	B1. ENLIGHTENMENT (witness to overcome ignorance)	C1. ETHNOCENTRISM (working against 'harmful' religions)
2. OPPONENTS (= ENCOUNTER AS CHALLENGE)	A2. COMPETITION (witness to overcome opposition to the truth)	B2. FULFILMENT (witness to complete what is inadequate)	C2. ETHNOCENTRISM (opposing 'inferior' religions)
3. STRANGERS (= NO ENCOUNTER)	A3. GUILTY SILENCE	B3. SMUG SUPERIORITY	C3. LAZY INDIFFERENCE
4. COLLEAGUES (= ENCOUNTER AS OPPORTUNITY)	A4. DIALOGUE FOR MORE AUTHENTIC WITNE	B4. DIALOGUE FOR DEEPER UNDERSTANDING	C4. PARTNERSHIP IN SERVING SOCIETY TOGETHER
5. FRIENDS (= ENCOUNTER AS JOY)	A5. DIALOGUE AS SHARING LOVE WITH NEIGHBOU	B5. PARTNERSHIP IN MUTUAL ENRICHMENT	C5. PARTNERSHIP IN SEARCHING FOR TRUTH TOGETHER

A few salient features of this diagram need to be explained. The first is that Blocks A3, B3 and C3 represent a watershed across the centre of the diagram. What lies above this are the emotionally negative responses which sees the others as opponents or enemies, whereas below it are the emotionally positive responses which see others as colleagues or friends. Since this paper deals with problems and perspectives of interfaith *dialogue*, it deals primarily with the bottom half of the diagram, in which dialogical forms of interfaith praxis are dominant.

Secondly, the commonest forms of interfaith praxis lie in a band running across the diagram from top left to bottom right, since it is predictable that an exclusivist theology would team up with a more negative type of interfaith interaction (Block A1 - top left), and that a pluralist theology would attract a more positive and open-minded form of praxis (Block C5 - bottom right). The more unusual (and therefore more interesting) forms of interfaith praxis lie at the bottom left and top right corners of the diagram, since it is hardly conceivable that Christian theologians who adopt an exclusivist theology would also develop close friendships with people of other faiths (Block A5).⁷ Likewise it seems contradictory to find someone in the top right-hand corner, combining a pluralist theory of salvation with an 'enemy' image of people from another faith (Block C1).⁸

1.3 Levels of discourse

Another helpful social science perspective for understanding interreligious dialogue comes from communication theory. David Krieger (1991, 1993) has developed a theory of communicative action by means of which to describe dialogue, using Wittgenstein's notion of three levels of discourse. Krieger develops a pragmatic semantics which distinguishes between *argumentative* discourse, *boundary* discourse and the discourse of *disclosure*. The first level, *argumentation*, involves claims to validity which are made on the basis of commonly accepted criteria and according to commonly accepted procedures of verification. In other words, it is only meaningful within a group of people who accept the same 'horizon of meaning' or 'play the same language game' (Wittgenstein). When the rules of the language game itself become controversial, as in contact between people from different religions and cultures, argumentative discourse breaks down and a new form of discourse is needed to set new rules or 'boundaries' for the game.

The second level of discourse, *boundary discourse*, does not make claims to validity, it proclaims the criteria by means of which claims to validity are verified. It therefore proceeds in the form of 'mission,' attempting through proclamative speech-acts and the ritual enactment of the founding events or myths of a community, to reinforce the belonging of members to their

7 It is primarily among 'radical evangelicals' that this kind of interfaith praxis is found, i.e. people with an exclusivist theology of salvation but who commit themselves to the struggles of suffering and oppressed people. An example is Costas (1981:152): 'The religions may be signs and instruments of God's kingdom if they can accept the scandal of the cross of Jesus amid the human crosses of the world. Since the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed (those whose historical destiny has been marked by the crosses of exploitation, injustice, and oppression) have been given a privileged place in the kingdom, it follows that no religious structure can be an adequate sign of its reality if it is not identified with the dispossessed in their misery and suffering.' A radical praxis of neighbourly love (solidarity with all who suffer, whether they are Christians or not) distinguishes this kind of exclusivist soteriology from other evangelical approaches.

8 I have labelled Blocks C1 and C2 as 'ethnocentrism' because the primary reason why someone with a pluralist soteriology would see people of another religion as enemies or opponents (who therefore need to be countered or opposed) is a sense of cultural superiority. The negative attitude of many pluralist Christians to the 'barbaric' practices of African religions or of the contemporary Islamic revival is a case in point. Their theological theory affirms that these religions are valid ways of salvation to their followers, but their cultural sensibilities override this 'liberal' theological impulse to create a negative or oppositional interfaith praxis.

particular group: Second-level boundary discourse... is that form of communicative action that produces socialization, integration into a community, and personal as well as cultural identity (Krieger 1993:343). Krieger argues that these two levels of discourse are inadequate to facilitate meaningful communication between people who play different language games or have been socialised into different cultural and religious communities. The only form of universalism that can emerge from these two levels of discourse is an *apologetic universalism*, which requires the conversion of the other.

To develop the 'pragmatic space' for a real encounter between cultures and religions, a discourse of *disclosure* is needed, which 'makes the 'other' into a constitutive condition of meaning and 'being' and enables a 'creative and transformative encounter, rather than a polemical, apologetic, and finally solipsistic self-affirmation' (Krieger 1993:345). For this form of discourse to be meaningful, it has to be non-violent and not rely on power or coercion. Such discourse can produce a communicative or dialogical universalism, which does not mean rejecting one's own faith or the creation of a world religion:

The goal of interreligious dialogue cannot be the proclamation of a new syncretism, a sloppy synthesis, the artificial and lifeless construction of a world religion or an abstract common denominator of all faiths; instead, interreligious dialogue must deepen and purify all religions and, in a certain sense, preserve their uniqueness (Krieger 1993:353).

This distinction between levels of discourse is helpful to understand the difference between interreligious dialogue and other forms of communication in which Christian theologians have been trained. Our university training has sharpened our argumentative skills, while our belonging to Christian communities of faith and our ministry formation in seminaries have socialised us into proclaimers of the truth. But most of us have had very little exposure to third-level interreligious or intercultural discourse, due to the artificial and repressive social conditions created by apartheid. And the skills for this cannot be learnt from books or in lecture rooms. Krieger (1993:347), who draws on the thought of Victor Turner, insists on a methodological conversion: 'the free entrance into a new world of meaning from out of an old one, via an unstructured, nonarticulated, and unordened transitional space.' Mark Kline Taylor (1991:159), who also quotes Turner, argues for an approach of 'intercultural liminality,' which also has a socio-political dimension: 'The valuation of difference, which leads to a sustained encounter and knowledge of the other, then, entails a praxis of resistance against anything that disempowers the other.' This is a *way of life* which can only be learnt through interreligious and intercultural encounter, which emphasises again the importance of the *insertion* phase of the theological process (see 1.1).

Having briefly set out the theoretical framework followed in this paper, I now proceed to reflect, from experience, on some problems and perspectives of interreligious dialogue. I look at dialogue from three perspectives: as relationship, as partnership, and as challenge to integrity. These three dimensions correspond to three types of encounter: face to face, shoulder to shoulder, and back to back.

2. Dialogue as relationship

2.1 Face to face encounters

Faith-to-faith dialogue is primarily a *face to face* encounter between people of different religious traditions or communities, which cannot really be orchestrated or organised. Some of my most lasting dialogue impressions have been from chance encounters, often in the street, when suddenly a flash of insight opened up to me. I will never forget the old Hindu woman (in what was then called Germiston Asiatic Bazaar) who asked me in the late 1960s, when I was

an undergraduate student, if I had ever seen a fowl drinking water. She explained that a fowl takes a beakful of water, lifts its head to let the water run down its throat and then takes another beakful. And she added 'You see, for every drop of water that the fowl drinks, it first gives thanks to God, before taking another sip. That is what we should also do.' This simple parable from nature made a deep impression on my young evangelical mind (Block A2), because it confronted me with a number of intriguing questions: What is the origin of this nugget of religious wisdom? Is she talking about the same God that I talk about? Is she not perhaps closer to God with her earthy spirituality of life as gratitude than I am, with my head full of Greek and Hebrew words and complex theological concepts?

Encounters like this have made me move *down* the diagram, to begin to see people of other faiths as colleagues and friends, but also *across* the diagram to explore the theological positions of inclusivism and pluralism.

2.2 Dialogue and commitment

My experience of dialogue has, however, not made me into a theological relativist. I approach this topic as a committed Christian and an ordained church minister. Too often the perception exists that it is essential to suspend one's own faith convictions in order to engage in interreligious dialogue. There *are* people who do that, but it is my conviction that such an approach does not lead to meaningful dialogue, since the practitioners of such dialogue often get isolated from the mainstream of their own religious communities into a radical fringe which simply gets written off. This is the first *problem* of dialogue that I want to mention, namely that it can become an elitist occupation of a few marginalised believers from each tradition who are no longer recognisable or welcome within their faith communities (which can happen to people in Blocks B5 and C5). Eric Sharpe (1994:34) has expressed it well:

The worst possible dialogue would be between a Hindu pretending to be a Christian and a Christian pretending to be a Hindu. The next worst would be between a semi-secular Christian and a semi-secular Hindu in a demilitarized zone between the frontiers of the two great traditions, out of earshot of Christians and Hindus alike.

Such dialogues may in fact be interesting and personally fulfilling, but I opt for an approach which emphasises commitment to a religious community and the beliefs which constitute its unique identity. Leonard Swidler (1986:252) says in the third commandment of his 'Dialogue Decalogue': 'Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity.... No false fronts have any place in dialogue.' Likewise, Paul Knitter (1985:207f) emphasises:

Dialogue must be based on personal religious experience and firm truth claims.... Those who ... would urge a religious dialogue built on *epoché* - that is, a stepping outside one's religion and a suspension of one's own religious experience and beliefs - are removing the heart of religious dialogue.

In dialogue one is thrown back on the resources of one's own faith and often challenged to 'give an account of the hope that is in you,' to use the words of I Peter 3:15. Your partners in dialogue want to know what you think and believe about crucial issues, so that there is no escape into woolly spirituality or vague generalisations. One of my most uncomfortable dialogue moments was in a WCRP dialogue conference in 1988 with the title *Believers in the Struggle*, which was held in Soweto (see Kritzinger 1991a:224). A Muslim participant from the Western Cape asked us how it was possible that Archbishop Desmond Tutu could call President PW Botha his *brother*. In terms of his Islamic understanding of brotherhood and justice he found it totally inconceivable, because he refused even to shake the hands of a

person claiming to be a Muslim who was involved in the tricameral parliament at the time. Such a person was simply no longer his brother in Islam, because he had become part of a system of injustice and oppression. This sparked off an intense discussion among the Christians at the conference about the implications of calling one another 'brother' and 'sister.' It brought us closer together and helped us see the nature of our Christian faith more clearly, but it was accompanied by a great deal of soul-searching and agonising. We found ourselves in a third-level discourse, where openness to the challenge of the 'other' led us to deepen and purify our religion and preserve its uniqueness.⁹

I have made the point: interreligious dialogue in South Africa as I have experienced it is not for the fainthearted or for 'wishy-washy' liberals. Your partners in dialogue will not let you get away with it.

2.3 Dialogue and openness

Having said this, however, I must immediately add that the faith commitment required of a believer in dialogue is not an arrogant or chauvinist one: 'My religion, right or wrong!' In fact, Swidler's ninth commandment (1986:253) is:

Persons entering into interreligious, interideological dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological traditions... one must stand within a religious or ideological tradition with integrity and conviction, but such integrity and conviction must include ... a healthy self-criticism. Without it there can be no dialogue - and, indeed, no integrity.

Linked to this, there is the point that, if dialogue is to be more than parallel monologues, there must be genuine learning and growth taking place as the partners enter each other's lives and faith worlds. That is why Swidler's first commandment (1986:251) says that 'the primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality.' Without the openness to learn and an attitude of healthy self-criticism, one slides towards what has been called 'the dialogue of the deaf' or (more truthfully) to parallel monologues. Lochhead (1988:77) helpfully describes a monologue as

a relationship in which the attitudes and beliefs of one party are in no way affected by a second party. The agenda of the first party cannot be challenged by the second party. The first knows what he/she intends to say to the other. That agenda does not change as a result of how the second party responds to it.

The crucial question is one of power: who controls the agenda of the encounter. And here we arrive at a second problem for dialogue: the difficulty of transforming our tendency to monologue when meeting 'others' into real dialogical encounters. I want to call this the constant *temptation* to monologue, because I believe that an attitude of monologue is morally wrong, at least from a Christian point of view. Like Lochhead (1988:80), I base this assertion on the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself: 'To love one's neighbour as oneself *is* to be in a dialogical relationship with one's neighbour' (emphasis added). In this respect the strong Protestant emphasis on the doctrine of revelation, conceived as the sovereign Word of God descending from on high, coupled with a particular kerygmatic understanding of mission as the courageous proclamation of this sovereign Word, has prevented us from developing dialogical approaches to other people, even to other Christians!

We slip a stitch in our theology if we ignore the *insertion* of the prophets into the circumstances of the people to whom they preached: their intense listening, analysis and

9 See the quote of Krieger (1993:353) in 1.3 above.

identification with the circumstances of the people, which was so characteristic of the prophets before they lifted up their voices to risk proclaiming the 'Word of God.' So the lives of the prophets (and the life of Jesus) were saturated in dialogue; how else were they able to use such effective and moving imagery from the everyday lives of the people around them?

By referring to the Hebrew prophets, I am not suggesting that all of us should end up as evangelistic preachers of salvation or death-defying prophets of social justice. What I am saying is that, *even if that is what you feel called to do*, then you cannot escape the imperative of dialogue, not if you want to be in continuity with what I perceive to be the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition, namely a non-propagandistic, non-imperialist concern for the well-being of other people. So we need to build dialogue into our theological method as a fundamental epistemological principle. We dare not distort the dialogical communication of God with us through the teachers of wisdom, the prophets, and Jesus himself, into monological fulminations against the 'others.'

So here we have another problem for dialogue, especially for Christian involvement in it: The way in which the Bible has been interpreted as outlawing dialogue for anything else but the establishment of friendly relations or a 'softening-up' process that leads to more authentic evangelism (Block A4). The worst example of this, for me, is the use of John 14:6 ('I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me') as a slogan written on the shields of those who ride into battle against unbelievers (Block A1). Those words, whatever else they may mean, are presented to us as spoken by Jesus to his close friends around a table on the night before his death. It was spoken by a man on his way to the gallows, who said in the same breath: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (Jn 15:12f). How can we wrench John 14:6 from *that* context and make it into an imperialist doctrine of religious exclusivism? The New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl has remarked that verses such as John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 often 'grow legs and walk around out of context,' so that despite the spirit of affirmation in which they were uttered, they become words of condemnation (Eck 1993:171).

A Christian approach to dialogue is rooted in an understanding of God's communication with the world in Jesus Christ as a two-way process of give and take (see Lochhead 1988:83ff). If God becomes knowable in Jesus of Nazareth, then we need to imitate his openness and vulnerability in his dealings with people; in other words, we need to develop openness to genuine dialogue, a procedure which could take us where we do not want to go.

The situation where I found it most difficult to be really open to a person of another faith was when I visited Rachel's Tomb in the city of Bethlehem some years ago. I was staying with Palestinian Christian friends and had many discussions with them on the situation in the Holy Land. I was deeply moved by the sufferings of the Palestinian people since 1947 and by the similarities between the policies of the Israeli government and that of our former apartheid rulers. The ubiquitous roadblocks and permits opened up raw memories in my mind. I therefore found it difficult to enter a sanctuary which was guarded by Israeli soldiers. But I went past the soldiers into Rachel's Tomb and next to me there was an old Jewish man, swaying backwards and forwards as he recited from a prayer book. As I stood there in silence, I was overwhelmed with sorrow because of the suffering that the place suggested to my mind: the death of great-grandmother Rachel while giving birth to Benjamin; the death of so many women in childbirth all over the world; the death of the children of Bethlehem at the hand of Herod; the death of thousands of children each year in Africa due to malnutrition; the string of miscarriages that my wife and I had had; the landlessness and suffering of the Palestinian

people.... And then I opened the prayer book lying in front of me, thinking that it may give me some comfort. It was the Hebrew Psalter, and there in front of me was Psalm 1. As I read the well-known words: *ashree ha'ish asher lo halakh ba'etsat resha'im* ('Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked' - RSV), I suddenly did not know what they meant. I was being pulled in many directions at once: Why am I reading from a Hebrew scripture, which is used to justify the Israeli occupation of Palestine, when my friends and hosts are Arabic-speaking Christians? Who are the 'righteous ones' who 'do not walk in the counsel of the wicked'? Who are 'the wicked' in this context? Is this pious Jewish man praying next to me one of the wicked? Should I reject him inwardly because he is part of an evil and oppressive system? Could I call him my brother, as Desmond Tutu did to PW Botha? As the dilemma of being Christian in Palestine and of interpreting the Hebrew Bible in that context slowly etched itself into my mind, I realised that I could not repudiate the piety of that man next to me. Before I left the tomb, I managed to open myself to him as a human being and a believer, but those complex contradictions still riddle my mind.

2.4 Face to face with ourselves

Taking the two previous sections together, one could say that dialogue as a way of life combines commitment and openness. It brings us not only face to face with the 'other' but also with ourselves. It is not surprising, then, that some theologians have compared the experience of interreligious dialogue with looking in a mirror.¹⁰ It affords one the opportunity not only of learning about other religions, but also of seeing more clearly what one's own faith is about. Dialogue, if it really works, leads to the - sometimes painful, sometimes joyful - discovery of what one's own religious tradition is all about and therefore forces one to see it in a new light. John Dunne coined the phrases 'passing over' and 'coming back' (in Knitter 1985:206) to express what happens in interreligious dialogue (even though he seems to have excluded women from this process):

The holy man of our time, it seems, is not a figure like Gotama or Jesus or Mohammed, a man who could found a world religion, but a figure like Gandhi, a man who passes over by sympathetic understanding from his own religion to other religions, and *comes back again with new insight to his own*. Passing over and coming back, it seems, is the spiritual adventure of our time.

Dialogue can be an unnerving experience, since it brings you face to face with a living person of another living religion, but also face to face with yourself and your own Christian tradition, warts and all. As a mirror experience, it becomes an epistemological principle in Christian theology. Knitter (1985:206) rightly says:

To fashion a theology of religions outside the praxis of dialogue would be as inappropriate as it would be for a tailor to make a suit without taking the customer's measurements.

So dialogue is not a luxury or a hobby of some enthusiasts, but a necessary dimension of contemporary theologising in a society and a world which is becoming increasingly pluralistic. To illustrate this, I want to quote a Chinese story from the 7th century C.E. It is called 'The Mirror,' and is told by Choan-Seng Song (1984:3ff) in his book *Tell us our Names*:

¹⁰ Loth *et al.* (1978) published a book in German with the title *Christentum in der Spiegel der Weltreligionen* [Christianity in the mirror of world religions] and Paul Griffiths (1990) edited an interesting volume entitled *Christianity through non-Christian eyes*.

Wang the Third was a stupid man. One day his wife wanted him to buy her a wooden comb and, being afraid that he would forget it, she pointed at the narrow moon crescent in the sky and said, 'Buy me a wooden comb, but it must be just like the moon in the sky.'

A few days later, the moon shone full and round in the sky. Wang the Third remembered what his wife had told him, and, since his purchase was to be as round as the moon, he bought a round mirror and took it home.

The moment his wife saw it, she stamped on the ground, fled back to her parents' home, and said to her mother, 'My husband has taken a concubine.'

The mother-in-law looked in the mirror and said with a sigh, 'If only he had chosen a young woman! Why did he take such a hideous old hag?'

Later they brought the case before the district judge. When he saw the mirror, he said, 'How dare you people, when you have a quarrel, dress up just like me! It's unbelievable!'

Such a classical story can have different levels of meaning. I want to highlight just one aspect of it: The three characters in the story do not realise that they are looking in a mirror. So they jump to conclusions and make judgements about *others*, without realising that they are judging *themselves* in the process! The story reveals how easy it is to have a faulty view of others if you do not have an honest view of yourself (and vice versa). It also reveals how intimately self-discovery is related to the discovery of the 'other.'

Dialogue is a challenging and demanding exercise. By looking into the face of another person, you are confronted with your own face. You are thrown back on your own faith commitments and you are stretched and challenged to grow as a believer and as a human being. The story is told of the Jewish rabbi whose disciples were debating the question of when precisely 'daylight' commenced. The one ventured the proposal: 'It is when you can see the difference between a sheep and a goat at a distance.' Another suggested: 'It is when you can see the difference between a fig tree and an olive tree at a distance.' And so it continued. When they eventually asked the rabbi for his opinion, he said: 'When one human being looks into the face of another and says, 'This is my sister' or 'This is my brother,' then the night is over and the day has begun.' Inter-religious dialogue wants to help the 'day' dawn in human relationships, so that we will not feel uncomfortable when we are face to face with people of other faiths but recognise each other as *believers*, however different our beliefs may be (see Kritzinger 1991b:ix).

3. Dialogue as partnership

3.1 Shoulder-to-shoulder co-operation

The relatively unknown Christian saint with the name of Exuperius once said: 'To love another person means not so much to look *at* that person, but to look *in the same direction*.' In other words, loving one's neighbour not only implies a face-to-face encounter, but also a shoulder-to-shoulder partnership. This brings me to another problem for interreligious dialogue, namely the fact that it can so easily degenerate into a mere hand-holding exercise where we learn more about one another and ourselves, but the process bears little fruit for society at large. This is often true of organised and official dialogue meetings, where only a few religious leaders or academics are present and where the agenda focuses on matters of doctrinal or spiritual interest.

I am not suggesting that such dialogues are worthless, but simply that they are inadequate. It seems to me that one of the important priorities for religious communities in South Africa is to co-operate in the uphill struggle for the moral, spiritual and social reconstruction of our society. It is not sufficient for religious leaders of different traditions to stand shoulder to

shoulder at official functions to pray for the country. In fact, such an arrangement may even become counterproductive if those leaders insist on preaching in their prayers and on making them as long as they do. The real challenge facing us is to pool the resources of our religious traditions and communities to tackle the major task of creating a united democracy and a just economy (Block C4?).

This agenda is reflected in the name of WCRP (World Conference on Religion and Peace), an interfaith organisation which has been operating in South Africa since 1984. It mentions religion and peace in one breath and tries to unite religious communities in projects of reconciliation, reconstruction and development.¹¹ But it is probably in community organisations and political parties that interfaith co-operation for justice takes place most frequently and effectively, as followers of different faiths (and of no faith) work together for the good of their communities. In this case interreligious dialogue is not on the agenda as a separate issue; it is an occasional tea-time exercise when people take a break from work to share their life stories with each other. It is this 'dialogue of life' which is the most important type of dialogue, and it is for this interaction that Christian education and preaching should prepare church members. Because if Christians, who represent such vast human and material resources, withdraw from co-operation or shy away from sharing what they have, it will seriously weaken both the project of public reconstruction and the relevance of Christian witness.

3.2 Partnership and prejudice

However, it is not easy to cooperate as people of different religious communities, especially when one is talking about official participation by religious groups in community projects. There are often fears of being co-opted or used by the 'others.' If one gets involved in a project to 'look good' in the eyes of the community or to gain more members (Block A2), then clearly one would not want to share the honours (or the converts) with another religious community.

In other words, the selflessness of the community involvement of a religious body is tested at this point. But there is also the question of possible tension within your religious community if you decide to co-operate with a group regarded by some of your members as 'pagans' or a 'false religion' or as 'demon-infested.' I have wondered whether there were members of the Rhema Church (Block A2 or A4?) who were unhappy about their church co-operating with Muslim groups in disaster relief to Rwanda some months ago (Block C4?). It will probably be difficult for members of the Dutch Reformed Church to co-operate as equal partners with Muslims, at least if they accept their General Synod's resolution of 1986 to declare Islam 'a false religion which represents a serious threat to Christianity in South Africa, and the world' (DRC 1986:683 - own translation), which probably represents Block A1. So the *theology of religions* of a local religious community is also tested in the process.

In spite of all these obstacles, I am convinced that this route of participation in service to the community is one of the most important dimensions of interreligious contact that we need to develop, because it is the most natural and fruitful setting for genuine dialogue.

¹¹ The book *A decade of interfaith dialogue* (Lubbe 1994) gives a good picture of the activities of WCRP-SA over the past ten years.

3.3 Partnership and power relations

Co-operation in service is essential for dialogue, and yet here another potential obstacle arises, even more acutely than in other forms of dialogue, namely the question of *power relations*. The seventh commandment of Swidler's (1986:253) *Dialogue Decalogue* reads: 'Dialogue can take place only between equals' and that is certainly the ideal. But we all know how easily certain individuals and groups can 'hijack' a project and manipulate others in the process. Let me just say that it is a real test for our transitional democracy to see if we can develop the honesty and openness to make such partnerships work. Regular face-to-face sessions will be an essential feature of such projects, where the power relations can be sorted out and the rules of co-operation drawn up. Every bit of experience in interreligious and intercultural dialogue will then prove to be of immense value in the creation of a climate of trust and in conflict resolution if things threaten to go wrong.

An abiding insight for me from the experience of dialogue was the bright yellow statue of the Buddha which I saw in a Buddhist temple in Colombo, Sri Lanka. There was a seated Buddha figure, touching the ground with his right hand. But the remarkable thing was that all five fingers of that hand were the same length and could therefore touch the ground simultaneously, which created a bit of a distorted hand. When I asked about it, someone explained that it symbolises the essence of a Buddhist way of life: making contact with the world and living in it, but as a person who has overcome greed. If a person with a normal hand touches the ground with all five fingers simultaneously, the hand has a 'grabbing' shape. But the Buddha overcame the desire to have and to grab, so he can touch the ground with all his fingers simultaneously without grabbing, without wanting ever more money, pleasure, power or control. We can do with a large dose of such greedlessness as we struggle to build up a society of justice, so we must allow ourselves to be challenged and enriched by the symbols, myths and rituals of other religions.

4. Dialogue as challenge to integrity

4.1 Back-to-back truthfulness

Let me conclude by suggesting that the acid test for the integrity of our relationship with people of other faiths is not what we do or say when we meet them or work together with them for a better society. It is what we do when we are alone with 'our people,' in other words, what we do 'behind one another's backs.' So, to complete my set of pictures, there is not only a face-to-face and a shoulder-to-shoulder dimension to dialogue, but also a back-to-back dimension. Because that is where we begin to gossip about 'them' when we are among 'our' people, in the cosy comfort of our fortresses of truth, laughing at 'their' scruples, scoffing at 'their' ignorance or arrogance. If inter-religious dialogue is an embodiment of neighbourly love, then it is the ninth commandment (of Moses, not of Swidler), that we break most frequently: 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour' (Exodus 20:16). I shudder when I think how many half-truths and whole lies about other religions have been preached from the pulpits and taught in the class rooms of our churches, mosques, synagogues and temples. The test of our commitment to dialogue will be whether we stand up for the truth about the beliefs of our dialogue partners when our fellow-believers start misrepresenting or maligning them.

This struck me most forcefully in 1993 when I was privileged to visit Khartoum. In the Sudanese National Museum there is a section with artifacts of the Nubian Church, among them some beautiful icons of Christ, Mary and the apostles. I was enthralled by the symbolism of the icons, but what moved me most deeply was when I noticed some icons - one depicting the trinity and some others depicting Christ - of which the facial features were completely

scratched out. As I stood in front of those defaced works of art and devotion, I was deeply saddened and angered at the senseless acts of violence that we as religious people keep on doing to each other. I suffered with those mutilated symbols of a Christ re-crucified and I got an inkling of the powerlessness that Sudanese Christians must experience in that context. That night on television I saw another, very similar, image: that of a Serbian soldier with a green Islamic flag on the ground in front of him, raking it with bullets from the AK47 in his hands. It was as if the flag gave a few last convulsions and then lay still on the ground. Then I realised how crucial it is to strengthen interreligious dialogue in South Africa. It is a precarious exercise, surrounded by pitfalls and obstacles, plagued by insincerity and superficiality, regarded as irrelevant by secularists and as treason by fundamentalists, but it's the only process we have that can prevent our wonderful religious traditions from being dragged (once more) into legitimating systems of terror and violence.

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