

Paths and Pitfalls of Interreligious Understanding

Discussion Paper for the Trilogue Salzburg 2007

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I. Introduction

This paper intends to explore the issue of interreligious understanding. It is hoped that lessons can be drawn from this paper to facilitate both one-to-one encounters between adherents of different religious traditions as well as institutionalized forms of dialogue encouraged by governments and religious groups.¹

A. The need for interreligious dialogue

No one would disagree that interreligious dialogue can be contentious. It could therefore seem prudent simply to set religious differences to the side when seeking to resolve conflicts between members of different religions or different branches of the same religion. Concerning the conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians, for instance, there are calls to remove religious issues from the agenda for debate as "emotionally explosive" in order to get to the "core" of the conflict and to prevent "religious zealots" from sabotaging the search for peace.² There is some justification for this view. The disputes between Israelis and Palestinians have much to do with land, water, civil liberties, and national security. Nevertheless, because of the growing de-secularization of the Middle East³ and because leaders on both sides have used religious convictions to inflame mistrust, it is essential to discuss them, as well.

There are other significant reasons for maintaining that religious issues should be the focus of sustained, critical dialogue. Our world is obviously home to many cultures, civilizations, and religious traditions, but just as plainly there is but one world in which we must learn to live together—and it is getting smaller all the time. Growing Muslim migration to the West and increasingly violent expressions of Islamic fundamentalism have created incentives for conversation. In the wake of 9/11 and as a consequence of the bombings around the world, also carried out by terrorists claiming to act in the name of Islam, a general atmosphere of suspicion towards Muslims has been created. This has prompted both religious and political leaders to take a stand.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has argued that religious persons cannot be complacent when people are murdered in the name of God or a sacred cause. "If faith is enlisted in the cause of war, there must be an equal and opposite counter-voice in the name of peace. If religion is not part of a solution, it will certainly be part of the problem."⁴ Sacks has called for a theology of difference that will allow members of diverse religions to converse with and learn from each other in a spirit of mutual respect, without minimizing the differences between them. We shall return to this plea, later.

From the political side, dealing with religion in general and Islam in particular has become a top priority for politicians of the EU. Among the more pressing are concerns about the consequences of the growing number of Muslims in Europe and of Turkey's bid for EU membership for the future of the Union's socio-political fabric. In terms of external affairs, the EU has been compelled to develop strategies for dealing with countries with a predominantly Muslim population and for finding ways to engage in dialogue with Muslim political leaders. The German Presidency has pushed the issue of interreligious understanding even higher up the agenda. Faced with the concrete challenge of finding appropriate strategies to prevent further religious radicalization and to fight stereotypes of Islam that undermine the prospects for peaceful interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims, the German government has tried to engage moderate Muslim groups by creating national "advisory representative Islamic institutions."⁵ Questions persist, however, about whether secular governments and institutions can do justice to the self-understanding of Muslims. Do they risk forcing adherents of Islam into externally imposed categories and creating rivalries between Islamic traditions and those of other communities? In light of these and other questions, there can be no doubt that a more nuanced, substantive, and candid dialogue is needed to better inform European politicians and to devise future-oriented policies.

B. The importance of multilevel, interdisciplinary conversations

By insisting on the great need for dialogue among the world's religions, this paper does not fall prey to what Amartya Sen terms a "solitarist" analysis of personal identity.⁶ He argues convincingly that no single characteristic, affiliation, conviction, or set of practices can do justice to the complexity of anyone's identity.⁷ To maintain otherwise, as though religion, or class, or gender, or nationality, or race alone could constitute someone's identity "can be," in Sen's disarmingly simple prose style "a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world."⁸ Sen focuses particular attention on what he calls the civilizational, the cultural, and the religious forms solitarism can take. Each of these masks in distinctive ways the fact that "[a]ny person is a member of many different groups (without this being in any way a contradiction), and each of these collectivities, to all of which this person belongs, gives him or her a potential identity which—depending on the context—can be quite important."⁹ Accordingly, highlighting religious affiliation and commitments in the pursuit of mutual understanding and respect, as this paper does, should not be confused with the effort of those who fixate on a single marker of human identity in order to foment global or local sectarian confrontations.¹⁰ As this paper reflects on the paths and pitfalls of interreligious understanding it does so on the assumption that conflicts all over the world require a multilayered analysis.¹¹ Multilevel and interdisciplinary conversations should be encouraged, including specialists from the fields of politics, business, the humanities, and the natural and social sci-

ences. Examining the question of interreligious dialogue can be an important means, complementing others, for overcoming the misunderstandings that the unscrupulous will rely upon to promote hatred.

C. Overview: facing an alternative

Once religious issues are placed on the agenda for discussion, it may appear that the best way to reduce sectarian hostility among the world's religions is to emphasize their similarities, to identify a common denominator or set thereof that can serve to bind otherwise fractious groups into a harmonious whole. In different ways, the philosopher of religion John Hick and the World Ethos Project pioneered by the theologian Hans Küng take this approach. From this perspective, to highlight distinctiveness or accentuate the genuine alterity of each of the world's religions is inherently dangerous. It courts triumphalist contempt of other religions and breeds mutual suspicion and distrust among their adherents. While acknowledging the worthiness of their goal, this paper takes a different approach. It is dubious about the long term viability and success of any effort that seeks to minimize interreligious conflict by developing theories of religion or articulating a universal religious ethic that interpret religious differences as culturally variant expressions of a logically primary religious and human commonality. Ironically, to emphasize similarity in this fashion risks accepting the very fear of otherness that has prompted centuries of loathing and violence among different religious groups. While considering these approaches this paper intends to show that when the laudable goal of eliminating interreligious violence is pursued by means of vague statements of religious equivalence, then respect for the other as other is diminished and the opportunities for profound transformation of oneself and one's community through dialogue are limited. The view propounded here, then, is that a forthright discussion of differences, coupled with the development of certain dispositions, such as humility and empathy, may help promote understanding among members of different religious communities. Indeed, it may be that the course of the twenty-first century will turn largely on the question whether members of different religious groups can learn to live together harmoniously, without rancor and mistrust, and without denying their sometimes significant differences.

II. The Common Approach to Interreligious Understanding

The century of religious wars in Europe that concluded with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 prompted the development of various means for resolving religious disputes. One of the more common and enduring proposals has been to view religions as, at bottom, essentially the same.

A. Emphasizing essential similarity

From this perspective, religiously distinctive texts, histories, rituals, beliefs, and ethical norms, although not insignificant, are seen as variations on a common theme. Hans Küng and John Hick are among the more influential contemporary proponents of this popular approach.

In the variant that Hans Küng presented with the publication of *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*¹² the religions of the world need to affirm those elements of a universal ethic that they hold in common in order to promote peace and secure the welfare of the planet. Later, at the Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago in 1993, a draft prepared by Küng was endorsed and issued as the *Declaration towards a Global Ethic*¹³. Representatives of different world religions agreed in principle that their respective religions share "an irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life."¹⁴ The various teachings of the world's religions stand on this basic norm, which Confucius, Rabbi Hillel, and Jesus described quite similarly, and which is now widely known as the Golden Rule: "What you wish done to yourself, do to others."¹⁵ On the basis of this norm, the Declaration formulates four "irrevocable directives" that it insists are based on "guidelines...found in most of the religions of the world."¹⁶ These include a commitment to a culture of non-violence, of solidarity and a just economic order, of tolerance and a life of truthfulness, and of equal rights and partnership between men and women.¹⁷

In the variant that John Hick presents¹⁸, mutual respect among participants in interreligious dialogue is impossible unless they avoid the twin temptations of maintaining that their beliefs and allied practices are either the sole true ones (with others being false or delusory), or the sole completely true ones (with others being incomplete or distorted). Instead they should affirm that "the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real...; and...[that] within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is taking place."¹⁹ Participants in interreligious dialogue should learn to see religions as more or less equally truthful responses to an unknowable ultimate reality. The "Real," as Hick calls it, works together with the adherents of different religions to create socially and historically conditioned texts, symbols, rituals, practices, doctrines, and polities. Because each religious tradition is an equally plausible and attractive response to the same unknowable Real, Hick has urged his fellow Christians to reject the ancient claim that Jesus Christ is constitutive of salvation for all. He has likewise urged members of the world's great living religions to drop any doctrine that asserts a superior grasp on reality or a superior means of attaining such a grasp. Hick is convinced that all members of religious traditions should adopt his revisionist-pluralist

theory if they are serious about engaging in dialogue that seeks mutual understanding, respect, and peace.

Although Hick and Küng are certainly right that there is too much religious mistrust and violence in our world, it remains questionable whether reducing both requires or is substantially advanced by proposals that emphasize abstract notions of sameness. There are several difficulties created by treating different religions as basically the same.

B. Some weaknesses of this approach

1. Denying radical difference

First, neither Hick nor Küng believes that the differences among the world's major religions are sufficiently radical, in some instances, to go all the way down. Yet there is no higher-order explanatory synthesis of the world's religions that can account for their differences without distorting the very beliefs and practices they purport to explain. Several examples indicate the depth of the differences and why they elude simple, surface explanations.

The Christian claim that God is a tri-personal relation of one divine essence cannot be reconciled to Jewish and Islamic views of God without significant alteration. Not that Christians disagree with Jews and Muslims that God is one, of course, but trinitarian monotheism, with its emphasis on Jesus as the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, is simply not what Jews and Muslims believe about God. Jews deny the incarnation, as well as the Christian belief in Jesus' messianic status. Muslims regard Jesus as a prophet who helped prepare the way for Muhammad, and the Qur'an specifically rejects the Christian belief that God has begotten a son (Sura 2). To move beyond the Abrahamic religions, Buddhists deny that any god has the power its devotees claim for it.

Members of the world's religions also disagree (sometimes with members of their own religion) over how best to conceive the cause of and solution for what is sometimes called "the human condition". Is it a prideful rebellion against God, the reconciliation of which requires a fully divine and fully human redeemer, as Christians following the Augustinian tradition maintain? Or is it ignorance of our true self's identity with the essence of all that is that can be overcome through meditation, as Hindus who revere the Upanishadic sages hold? Is it spiritual forgetfulness and consequent lethargy that can be defeated, by those whom Allah chooses to guide, through upholding the Five Pillars of Islam? Is it a delusory sense of self-permanence that can be transcended, step by step, by means of the Noble Eightfold Path taught by Siddhartha Gautama and practiced by Theravada Buddhists? These are not idle differences that can be gathered up in a comprehensive explanatory synthesis. They deeply affect the lives of those who

accept one or another version of the diagnosis and remedy for what ails humanity. They yield different conceptions of the self, different notions of community, different patterns of social relations, and different views of the nature of reality itself.

Finally, members of the world's religions do not agree on the proper form of what those from North Atlantic societies usually call, misleadingly, "church-state relations". Some Christians view the head of state as the leader of his or her branch of the religion, while others insist that no institutional affiliation or association between civic government and church leadership is warranted or appealing. In Islam, one also finds a wide range of relationships, from theocracies that deny the very notion of a secular realm separate from the rule of religion, to secular democracies. Current political debate in India focuses on, among other things, the wisdom of reconstituting India as a Hindu nation (*Hindu rashtra*).²⁰ In Japan, the emperor is the chief priest of Shinto, the state religion, while presiding as head of state over a country most of whose citizens quite comfortably think of themselves as being at once Shinto and Buddhist. These differences over how to relate religious and civic institutions necessarily affect the sorts of legislative and political options open to leaders.

The relative disregard for the culturally embedded nature and significance of diverse religious beliefs and practices characteristic of this approach is evident in K ung's emphasis on the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule is an abstract principle and, as such, is an empty form that cannot sufficiently guide our behavior with those from different religious and social backgrounds. A Western European Christian man would unwittingly offend an observant Muslim woman if he treated her the way he wanted her to treat him when being introduced: looking her in the eye and offering her his hand. While trying to be polite and welcoming, he might in fact be regarded as boorish and invasive. The problems are compounded in a clinical medical setting where observant Muslim women are typically not treated by male physicians. Once again, the Golden Rule is of little help here; indeed it could actually make the encounter more problematic by disposing a male doctor to impose a set of behaviors and relational expectations on the interaction that the Muslim woman would find religiously offensive. For instance, observant Muslim women may expect family members to be part of, if not leaders in, any decision making process, which contrasts with the western, individualistic focus on patient autonomy. The Golden Rule, even when specified to the degree it has been by the World Ethos project to include truthfulness, may also prove inadequate in a medical setting because people from different religious and socio-cultural backgrounds disagree profoundly about whether a terminally ill patient should ever be told about his or her condition, by physician or family. The point is not that the Golden Rule should be ignored or, worse, jettisoned; rather, in order to be of practical assistance in day to day interactions and public policy formulation, it needs to be filled in by means of careful,

critical reflection upon the concrete particulars of any given socio-cultural and religious setting. To begin at the level of the Golden Rule, therefore, delays ultimately more fruitful sorts of candid exchanges.

Hick's approach, which claims that all religious adherents are engaged in basically the same act of becoming centered in the Real, is similarly hobbled by a persistent vacuity and inattention to the uniquely constitutive practical, liturgical, and doctrinal elements of different religions. If such particulars are truly secondary, it becomes difficult to explain why, for instance, a Jew in good faith may be disinclined to invite a Christian to perform a reading of the Torah at a Sabbath service or why a Christian in good faith may be equally hesitant to accept such an invitation. Similarly, one would have difficulty explaining in other than disparaging terms why a Christian may be reluctant to invite a Jew to share the Eucharist and why a Jew may be unwilling to accept such an invitation.²¹ Hick's theory of religion inclines him to regard this reluctance as little more than natural but regrettable tribal pride.²² But it is not implausible to argue that the hesitancy of some Jews and Christians to share in certain liturgical rites is rooted not in pride but in an acknowledgment that religious beliefs and practices can play a crucial role in constituting different personal and communal identities, rather than being secondary expressions of a common human core.

2. Diminishing opportunities to foster respect

Second, the desire to harmonize differences in order to diminish occasions for enmity and mistrust undermines appreciation of the uniqueness of diverse religious dispositions and activities. With their emphasis on essential similitude Hick and Küng undervalue genuine otherness by treating it as essential sameness differently expressed. As Hick puts it, "from a religious point of view, basically the same thing is going on in all of them."²³ It is doubtful that such an approach fosters sincere respect for others as such. Rather than valuing the other as genuinely, and in some instances radically, different, this approach counsels dialogue participants to view the other as oneself in a different religious and cultural guise. Nor does this approach hold much promise for promoting esteem for the cogency, internal coherence, and beauty of religions other than one's own, since the mutual fittingness of someone else's beliefs, myths, narrative traditions, and practices do not matter nearly so much as the purportedly essential core abstracted from them.

3. Limiting the prospects for profound transformation

Finally, in the context of interreligious dialogue, the insistence on prior agreement imposes troubling restrictions on the kinds of mutual understanding and growth that constructive dialogue can occasion. One engaged in conversations that highlight similarity

is assured at the outset that fundamental disagreements are impossible. Such disparities as are discovered remain safely at the level of differing phenomenal responses to various manifestations of the Real or different articulations of the same global ethic. There is no risk involved, no vulnerability, no genuine openness toward another's perspective that might significantly alter one's own. The stipulated commonalities provide a safety net or, better, a harness that prevents one stumbling into genuinely alien—and perhaps attractive—territory.

As a consequence, the transformation such dialogue produces will be limited. One's fellow participants are not so different after all, for they too are following the Golden Rule and they too are engaged in the common human project of becoming centered in the Real. Dialogue with them, therefore, "is not an encounter with the 'other;' rather, it is an encounter with one's own selfhood, differently expressed"²⁴. Although these conceptions of dialogue may preserve harmony, they do so by significantly limiting opportunities for the sort of profound self- and communal-transformations that a more candid dialogue might yield.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tellingly observed:

"Often, when religious leaders meet and talk, the emphasis is on similarities and commonalities, as if the differences between faiths were superficial and trivial. That is not, however, what comes to the fore at times of conflict. It is then that what seem to an outsider to be minor variations take on immense significance, dividing neighborhoods and turning erstwhile friends into enemies.... We need, in other words, not only a theology of commonality—of the universals of mankind—but also a theology of difference: why no one civilization has the right to impose itself on others by force: why God asks us to respect the freedom and dignity of those not like us."²⁵

III. An Alternative Approach

The outlines of an alternative approach have begun to appear in the foregoing.

A. Acknowledging profound differences

Given that the differences among the world's major living religions are, in many cases, irreducible to a purportedly more basic commonality, any a priori judgment that fundamental disagreement is impossible is no longer persuasive. Cultivating esteem for the variety among (and within) the world's religions should incline participants in dialogue frankly to affirm the truth of their own distinctive beliefs and practices, while acknowledging their sometimes profound disagreements with others. It is unnecessary to assume the existence of a common religious essence in order to avoid conflict. Indeed,

denying the existence of such an essence may actually foster a deeper openness to the alternative forms of life and worldviews embraced by one's dialogue partners.

B. Hazards ahead

Naturally, this approach to interreligious dialogue runs risks of its own that need to be addressed.

1. Irrational disagreements?

One concern is the seeming irrationality of making exclusivist truth claims on the basis of religious experiences that help constitute what distinguishes one religious tradition from another. In the face of competing religious truth claims, it may appear more reasonable to follow Hick's advice by refusing to hold any "doctrines implying an exclusive or a decisively superior access to the truth or the power to save."²⁶ This is why Hick has advised his fellow Christians to abandon the ancient belief that Jesus Christ is essential for salvation. Ironically, that advice is itself a religious truth claim. Hick's tactic, therefore, is no less arbitrary than the one he criticizes. There is no "neutral" or "objective" port in which to ride out this storm. Nothing can shelter one from the possibility of being mistaken when taking a position and offering reasons for one's views. Whoever is seeking truth, therefore, ought to feel compelled to explore alternatives to his or her own definition and embodiment of it, even at the risk that he might be wrong and the other might be right. The way forward is not to avoid this risk, but to accept it in the company of others who share one's longing for truth and who recognize that there is no single path toward it.²⁷

2. A covert proselytism?

Does the approach advocated in this paper encourage proselytism? Would frank exchanges among those who hold sometimes radically different religious beliefs unavoidably turn into more or less covert attempts to pull the other into one's own tradition? These fears are reasonable because in the popular imagination, proselytism is not a two-way, mutually instructive exchange, but a monologue by those uninterested in what the other has to say. Such monological proselytization denies the necessity of acknowledging that both sides in interreligious dialogue need each other. As John Paul II contended in his encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*: "Those engaged in this dialogue must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions, and be open to understanding those of the other party without pretense or close-mindedness, but with truth, humility, and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side."²⁸

3. Fomenting discord and violence?

Another of the more common criticisms of the view that has been developed here is that religious dialogue about differences will collapse into rancorous condemnations. Since members of different religions make mutually incommensurable truth claims, they cannot speak about their theological differences without fomenting violence or, at a minimum, breeding mistrust and, perhaps, enmity.²⁹ It is patently obvious that ill will and violence have resulted from encounters between members of different religions. However, it is logically fallacious to move from the premise that different religions are incommensurable to the conclusion that therefore conversations about that incommensurability will be hate filled. The Christian theologian John Cobb has devoted much of his career to dialogue with Buddhists in which the participants in the dialogue are candid about their disagreements. According to Cobb's accounts, these conversations have not fallen victim to animosity. Instead, they have deepened mutual appreciation of the compelling beauty and coherence of each other's religious tradition, an appreciation that is served by understanding the other religion in its own terms.³⁰ Mutually illuminating and constructive conversations can go forward among adherents of different religions who maintain a measure of certainty in their exclusivist truth claims while recognizing that others are doing the same. One need not suppose that fundamental agreement with one's dialogue partner is a necessary precondition for respecting and learning from her.

IV. Religious Resources for a Theology of Difference

The alternative approach discussed here raises at least two more questions. Why bother engaging in interreligious dialogue? And how can dialogue participants respect what is radically different from themselves and their own tradition? In short, do the world's religions have the conceptual resources to offer rationales both for conversing with members of other religions and for respecting their conversation partners in the process?

A. Religious bases for respecting others

There are several possibilities that suggest themselves as potential bases for respecting members of other religious traditions, none of which would be fully sufficient for everyone involved in the dialogue. The cogency of the arguments will depend, in part, on the religious tradition to which one belongs.

First, it is a biblical imperative to treat the stranger with respect and kindness precisely because he or she is a stranger. To cite just one example, the book of Leviticus says, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien

as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."³¹ Adherents of religious traditions that do not regard the Hebrew scriptures as authoritative have developed functionally equivalent rationales for treating others with respect and kindness. Mahayana Buddhists, for example, emphasize compassion and Confucians seek to model their behavior after the superior man (*junji*) of propriety (*li*) and humanness (*ren*), whom Confucius described in his *Analects*.

Second, when answering the question under consideration from a Jewish perspective, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks went back to the book of Genesis, where he found, to his own surprise, a theological basis for respecting difference. This is based on God's two covenants: one with humanity through Noah after the flood, and the other with the Jewish people through Moses after the Exodus. This balances a concern for all of humanity with the Jewish belief in the special relations between God and the Jews. God loves everyone, that is to say, not just his "chosen people." So everyone is worthy of respect. Notice that on this view, "[d]ifference does not diminish. Our last best hope is to recall ... the more ancient story of Noah after the Flood and hear, in the midst of hypermodernity, an old-new call to a global covenant of human responsibility and hope. Only when we realize the danger of wishing that everyone should be the same – the same faith on the one hand, the same McWorld on the other – will we prevent the clash of civilizations, borne of the sense of threat and war. We will learn to live with diversity once we understand the God – given, world-enhancing dignity of difference."³² Sacks is not the only Jewish voice to be marshaled in this effort. Eugene Korn has pointed out that the ancient rabbis held that human diversity is a sign of God's creative genius. From a common template (i.e., Adam), God is able to create the astonishing variety of human beings.³³ Whereas humans working from a template are constrained thereby to produce identical copies, God is able to produce a unique creature with every casting. To use compatible and more scientifically defensible terms, although humans share more than ninety-nine percent of our DNA, each one is distinguishable and infinitely valuable as such. From this perspective, to view persons as essentially the same risks dishonoring God's creative inventiveness.

Third, Christians have traditionally contended that God the Holy Spirit blows where it will. It is not bound to the Christian churches, but inspires those in other religious and nonreligious communities. In addition, Christians could argue that the Trinity, when understood with Augustine as a mysteriously dynamic union in differentiation, provides an analogy for regarding unity as compatible with difference, rather than as opposed to it. The unity of the human family need not be viewed, therefore, as homogeneity resting on either a common religious goal or a common religious ethic. Relations of love could weave us together; relations of mutual dependence would do the same. In either case, the love and dependence would be shared among those whose distinctive identities

are constituted in relation to one another. This approach does not deny our common humanity but sees it disclosed in particular acts of self-giving love.³⁴

B. Religious bases for the necessity of dialogue

The ways members of different religious traditions might conceive of interreligious dialogue as necessary for their own benefit as well as that of their partners—even while maintaining that there are some radical differences and maintaining a measure of confidence in the superiority of their own tradition—will be similarly tradition-specific. For instance, Mahayana Buddhists hold that supremely compassionate individuals can take the bodhisattva vow by pledging to remain in the world of suffering in order to secure the enlightenment of every sentient being. Since bodhisattvas can adopt any expedient means to aid those in need, bodhisattvas conceivably could speak through those who profess religious beliefs other than those of Mahayana Buddhism. From a Christian perspective, the admission of individual and communal sin can serve—even if it has not typically done so—to underwrite the need for Christians to engage in dialogue with members of other religious traditions. Given that one of the manifestations of sin is blindness to at least some of its forms, Christians need to learn from others what sour fruits their words and actions are, perhaps unwittingly, bringing forth. It seems reasonable to suppose that members of other religious traditions could argue that our human frailties, however they be defined, can lead us to mistreat others and that, therefore, each of us needs to be confronted by those whom we mistreat or misunderstand in order to see the ways in which this mistreatment and misunderstanding has made itself manifest.

These quite cursory and tentative probings hopefully make clear that members of different religious traditions can develop their own unique but functionally equivalent rationales for respecting the alterity of their dialogue partners. And, it is hoped, it is also clear that a religious person would not need to abandon her conviction that, on balance, her own tradition, or at least her judgment of its central teachings and practices, is superior to others—in the sense of more nearly true—in order to feel a strong need to enter into dialogue with those who disagree.

V. Interreligious Competency

It would be significantly easier to carry on interreligious dialogue according to the alternative approach if one could find ways to prevent the disagreements that one needs to have to deepen one's appreciation for the truth from destroying mutual respect. Toward that end, it will be useful to draw from the recent publication of the Bertelsmann Stiftung entitled, "*Intercultural competence. The key competence of the 21st century?*"³⁵ This essay argues that in coming years the ability to deal constructively with cultural (includ-

ing religious) differences will become increasingly important. Developing certain core competencies that are needed "to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations" is therefore essential. These core competencies include specific attitudes (such as valuing cultural diversity and tolerating ambiguity), intercultural knowledge, communication skills, and reflection. While all of these are important, in the context of interreligious dialogue, the ability to reflect honestly on one's own tradition while remaining open to the lessons others might teach is especially so. Intercultural competence "presupposes an ability to change perspective, i.e. to shift, expand or relativize one's own frame of reference."

A. The importance of humility

One of the correlates of this competence is humility, which requires that members of a given religion do not see their own religion as absolute, but realize that every tradition, including their own, has its blind spots, its shortcomings, and its weaknesses. Humility would also require dialogue participants to acknowledge that they need help to discern more fully the effects of their own tradition's words and actions on others. It does not entail that one reject his beliefs, or hold them less than wholeheartedly. As Jeffrey Stout observes: "Some of the sentences...that we are now warranted in asserting and justified in believing are not true.... If we knew which ones were false, we would immediately cease believing them. But knowing that some are false isn't the same as knowing which are false. So we go on accepting each one as true until we have reason for doubting something in particular."³⁶ Humility, therefore, does not justify timidity; it undermines arrogance.

B. The importance of empathy

Another correlate of this competence is empathy, which can be conceived as an imaginative identification with someone else's existential situation. This is both an affective and an intellectual skill. It enables dialogue participants to recognize and try to meet the needs of others. In this connection, Naim Stifan Ateek and Leah Shakdiel have spoken of the desirability of all parties to the conflict in the Middle East coming to recognize the "deepest needs" and "longings" of their counterparts.³⁷ The lesson is broadly applicable. The better one understands and empathizes with the particular problems identified by one's dialogue partners, the more likely is it that one will come to appreciate the appropriateness and cogency of their tradition's solutions. Empathy also requires dialogue partners to develop sufficient intellectual flexibility to imagine quite alien modes of discourse and norms for evaluation. Muslim theologian Riffat Hassan has rightly complained about Christians who persist in asking her to define the Islamic understandings of redemption and salvation.³⁸ Since Islam does not use these concepts, these questions are both pointless and frustrating. To avoid the sort of conversa-

tional collapse such as parochialism can trigger, dialogue participants must learn how to place themselves imaginatively within someone else's tradition, to try with utmost energies to see it from the inside out, to witness up close its internal coherence and tensions, its dynamism and diversity. Only by understanding a religion on its own terms will one be able to appreciate a tradition's beauty that is so obvious to its adherents.

Critical reflection on one's own as well as someone else's tradition, along with its dispositional correlates, humility and empathy, together can help to ensure that forthright discussions of differences remain charitable and constructive.

VI. Conclusions

As this paper has shown, participants in interreligious dialogue need not feel obliged to start their discussions with general and therefore vague lists of commonly held beliefs, values, or directives. Indeed, doing so will likely hamper the sort of full and free exchange that a common search for the truth and its embodiment requires. Without wishing to discount the desire for peaceful exchanges that might prompt one to search for commonalities, this paper has contended that a candid acceptance of differences coupled with the cultivation of certain virtues such as humility and empathy will more likely yield a substantive understanding and mutual appreciation. It therefore has a greater likelihood to provide a constructive framework within which public policy proposals can be worked out.

Given the context of the Salzburg Festival in which the current Trilogue Salzburg is being conducted, it is fitting that the dialogical search for mutual understanding and respect commended in this paper should be conducted in a way that resembles learning to love a complex piece of art. The image is apt not only because of the Salzburg Festival, but for many reasons, one of which is the way it inclines the partners involved to see interreligious dialogue as involving more than just their capacity for logical reasoning. Surely it also involves a more nearly aesthetic appreciation for the delicate balancing of the parts of a religious tradition and for the beauty of these relationships and the whole they constitute. In the mid-eighth century in Andalusia, Spain, three cultures—Judaic, Christian, and Islamic—managed to coexist harmoniously, albeit with occasional tensions. Such was the impact of this period that there remains in Toledo "a Christian church with an homage to Arabic writing on its walls...and a sumptuous fourteenth-century synagogue built to look like Granada's Alhambra [Mosque]."³⁹ These examples illustrate that close, sustained contact with those different from oneself can lead one to see the magnificence of other traditions and to alter one's own. The lessons of Andalusian history, to which María Rosa Menocal's important *The Ornament of the World* has drawn world-wide attention, have never been more timely. Fruitful inter-

religious dialogue should result, of course, in more than architectural borrowings. It should change, as it also did in Andalusia, the way lives are lead.

Dialogue should be seen as a principle means by which one opens oneself to someone genuinely other. This is inherently transformative. As one gives oneself to others and receives them in return, one undermines the myth of individualistic self-reliance. Accordingly, adherents of different religions should seek neither a purportedly essential religious homogeneity nor uniformity, but a complex unity based on mutual recognition, understanding, and esteem. Doing so, it is hoped, will go a long way toward addressing the most urgent social and environmental problems of this young century.

- As of July 2007 -

Endnotes

- ¹ This essay incorporates short excerpts from two essays already published by the author: "Frank Conversations: Promoting Peace among the Abrahamic Traditions through Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34.3 (Fall 2006); and "Interreligious Dialogue: Encountering an Other or Ourselves?" *Theology Today* 63.2 (July 2006). They are used with permission of the publishers.
- ² Naim Stifan Ateek, "The Basic Principles of Dialogue in the Israeli-Palestine Conflict: Respect, Honesty, Sincerity, Humility," in Haim Gordon and Rivca Gordon, ed. *Israel/Palestine: The Quest for Dialogue* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 61.
- ³ Hans G. Kippenberg, *Die Entsäkularisierung des Nahostkonflikts. Von einem Konflikt zwischen Staaten zu einem Konflikt zwischen Religionsgemeinschaften*, in Hans Joas and Klaus Wiegandt, ed., *Säkularisierung der Weltreligionen* (Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2007) pp. 465ff.
- ⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London, New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 25.
- ⁵ For the following see Sara Silvestri, *Islam and the EU: the merits and risks of Inter-Cultural Dialogue* (Brussels: European Policy Centre, Policy Brief June 2007).
- ⁶ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence* (New York & London: W. W. Norton and Co., 2006), p. xii.
- ⁷ Sen, p. 112.
- ⁸ Sen, p. xii.
- ⁹ Sen, p. 46.
- ¹⁰ Sen, p. 57.
- ¹¹ Naika Foroutan, *Kulturdialoge zwischen dem Westen und der islamischen Welt. Eine Strategie zur Regulierung von Zivilisationskonflikten* (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitätsverlag 2004).
- ¹² Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).
- ¹³ http://www.weltethos.org/dat_eng/index3_e.htm (Accessed July 2007). Also available in Hans Küng, ed. *Yes to a Global Ethic* (New York: Continuum, 1996).
- ¹⁴ Küng, *Yes to a Global Ethic*, p. 10.
- ¹⁵ Küng, *Yes to a Global Ethic*, p. 17.
- ¹⁶ Küng, *Yes to a Global Ethic*, p. 17.
- ¹⁷ Küng, *Yes to a Global Ethic*, pp. 17-25.
- ¹⁸ See the following by John Hick: *Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims*, in Leroy S. Rouner, ed. *Religious Pluralism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 197; *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 240, 252–96; *A Christian Theology of Religions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 46; and "A Pluralist View," in Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, ed., *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 50.
- ¹⁹ Hick 1989, p. 240.
- ²⁰ See John L. Esposito, et al., ed., *World Religions Today*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) pp. 276-79, especially 277, and pp. 329-33.
- ²¹ Cf. David Novak, "The Covenant in Rabbinic Thought," in Eugene B. Korn and John T. Pawlikowski, ed., *Two Faiths, One Covenant? Jewish and Christian Identity in the Presence of the Other* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 73.
- ²² Hick 1984, p. 197 and 1989, p. 235.
- ²³ Hick 1995b, p. 38.
- ²⁴ Sandra B. Lubarsky, *Tolerance and Transformation: Jewish Approaches to Religious Pluralism* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press 1990), p. 131.
- ²⁵ Sacks, p. 21.
- ²⁶ Hick 1984, p. 197.
- ²⁷ See the following on this topic: David B. Burrell, C.S.C., *Friendship and Ways to Truth* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); idem, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in Thomas D. Senor, ed. *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995) pp. 191-205; Keith Ward, Truth and Diversity of Religions, in Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker, ed. *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 109-25.
- ²⁸ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio: On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate* (1990), no. 56.
- ²⁹ See, for instance, Joseph Soloveitchik, *Confrontation*, in *Tradition* 6 (1964), p. 24.
- ³⁰ See John B. Cobb Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).
- ³¹ Leviticus 19.33-34; translation from the New Revised Standard Version. See also: Deuteronomy 10.17-19, Job 29.11-17, Jeremiah 7.5, Malachi 3.5, and Zechariah 7.8-10.
- ³² Sacks, p. 209.
- ³³ Eugene B. Korn, "One God, Many Faiths: A Jewish Theology of Covenantal Pluralism," in *Two Faiths, One Covenant?* p. 152.
- ³⁴ Cf. Gavin D'Costa, "Christ, the Trinity, and Religious Plurality," in D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), p. 19f.
- ³⁵ http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/bst/de/media/xcms_bst_dms_18255_18256_2.pdf (Accessed July 2007). The quotations in this paragraph are from this publication.

³⁶ Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 25.

³⁷ Ateek, "Basic Principles," p. 68; Leah Shakdiel, "Dialogue as an Opportunity for Spiritual Growth: Linking Tradition with Creativity," in *Israel/Palestine: The Quest for Dialogue*, p. 51.

³⁸ Riffat Hassan, *A Muslim's 'Dialogue' with Abraham Joshua Heschel*, in Harold Kasimow and Byron L. Sherwin, ed., *No Religion is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 157.

³⁹ María Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Co., 2002), p. 264. See also pp. 130 ff.