

Interfaith Dialogue: Lessons from the Ecumenical Movement

A couple of years ago, a priest-colleague told me of his recent experience of a neighbourhood interfaith dialogue event. Christians, most of them Catholics, had gathered for dialogue with members of other faiths, mostly Muslims. To my colleague's dismay, the Christians had commented that, in order to avoid embarrassment or offense to their Muslim dialogue partners, it would really be better to say nothing of the Christian doctrine that God is Trinity. Why not just set it aside, they suggested. Moreover, they had added, it is just too hard to explain the doctrine anyway.

Now for me, for whom the theology of the Trinity has been a major interest, not just in my academic work as a theologian but in my prayer and spiritual life, this was a cause of distress. But it is not just that the doctrine means a lot to *me*. It lies at the very heart of our Christian understanding of God. It is indeed one of the doctrines of the Christian faith that distinguishes Islam from Christianity. It grieves me to think that any fellow Christian could think of suggesting that we should set that doctrine aside or mute any mention of it, for fear of embarrassment or offence to our brothers and sisters of other faiths. What is more, I suspect that this incident is not particularly unusual, such is the paucity of many Christians' knowledge and understanding of their faith. But this incident caused me to ponder about what is going on, what confusion is at play, and what misguided notions are at work that this could occur.

Setting our sights for interfaith dialogue

The vignette begs reflection from a number of perspectives. It firstly highlights a confusion, at least at grassroots level, concerning the aims of interfaith encounter, and thus underscores the importance of educating our communities, members young and old, about the nature and the goal of interfaith dialogue. The incident which my colleague related points to the need to be clear about the presuppositions that we bring to interreligious encounter. It is vital to articulate what it is that we seek to achieve, and what we do not, in other words, to set our sights for interfaith encounter. It is also very important to make clear that there is no sacrificing the doctrines which we hold dear in our particular faith tradition, be it Christian, Muslim, or any other, on the table of interfaith dialogue.

The goal of interfaith dialogue is not to achieve agreement on matters of doctrine. It is not about finding the lowest common doctrinal denominator to which we can both assent. Nor is it about striving to find correspondences between our faith traditions, though it may be that resonances might emerge.¹ There is certainly no place in interfaith encounter for any kind of false politeness which would reduce what we believe to what we hope the other finds unobjectionable or inoffensive. To fail to realise these things is actually to put at risk the very task we seek to undertake. It is to undermine the very possibility of the authentic dialogue we want to have and the genuine understanding of each other which we hope to foster and advance. The very integrity of our interfaith dialogue requires that there be no resiling from the mystery of God as our faith tradition has come to understand it for the sake of averting embarrassment, discomfort or offence. Genuine dialogue is not served by insincerity, dishonesty or disrespect in regard to our own tradition or in regard to the traditions of other believers; nor is it served by glossing over differences and difficulties or by a misguided search for points of correspondence.

¹ See Dan Madigan, "Nostra Aetate and the Questions it Chose to Leave Open," *Gregorianum* 87/4 (2006): 781-96, including Madigan's reference to difficulties in interfaith dialogue arising from a confusion in theological categories.

Genuine dialogue requires our *speaking* with integrity about ourselves and our faith. Even more importantly, it demands a deep *listening* to each other and, moreover, a listening, first and foremost, not to our explanations of the doctrines we hold, but to each others' stories and to what lies in each others' hearts. Indeed, our ultimate aim in encountering each other is possibly best expressed in terms of hearing through each others' ears and hearts. Perhaps, most of all, it is to hear and to better understand each others' pain and what it is that hurts each other, for there are the wounds of past injustices and, precisely there, the wounds from which new life can emerge.

Mystics, both Christian and Sufi, often speak in terms of the ears and the eyes of the heart. Indeed, the metaphor has a much esteemed place in Christian spirituality. In the Letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul writes: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the *eyes of your heart* enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power" (Eph 1:17-19). St Benedict, founder of the highly influential Benedictine school of Christian spirituality, instructed his monks to "listen with the ears of your heart." In fact, these are the very first words of the prologue in Benedict's Rule. Sufi mysticism also recognises the heart as the spiritual centre of intelligence and wisdom and urges the practice of "opening of the heart" as the way to the truth.² The Sufi teacher, Hazrat Inayat Khan, for example, makes frequent reference to the "ears of the heart." In other words, instead of straining for agreement in matters of faith in interfaith dialogue, or searching for correspondences in our doctrines, we are looking for authentic personal connections, for deep encounter with each other, and for the truth, beauty and goodness in each other. Openness and reciprocity is clearly vital to the endeavour, as in any genuine conversation. Moreover, interfaith dialogue is furthered when we come to it with an attitude of magnanimity which is ever ready to give the benefit of the doubt to each other, especially in what confuses or perplexes us.

Where then to set our sights in interfaith dialogue? What is the aim of interfaith endeavours? It is to grow in mutual understanding, respect, empathy and tolerance. It is to break down barriers of suspicion and mistrust, resentment and misunderstanding. It is to expose and root out our own biases, blindspots and prejudices. It is to foster harmony in our communities, and to advance collaboration in nurturing human flourishing at both local and global levels. It is, moreover, not only to arrive at a deeper understanding of the other with whom we are in dialogue. It is also to arrive at a deeper understanding of *ourselves* and *our own* faith traditions, precisely in and through coming to a deeper understanding of the other. Here is one of the exquisite paradoxes of interfaith dialogue. The goal of interfaith dialogue is not, as has too often been feared, particularly by adherents of non-Christian faiths on the basis of their previous experience of Christian missionary endeavours, to convert the other to the one's own faith. Nor is it to mute or dilute the uniqueness of one's own faith tradition and to succumb to a relativism that reduces the world's religions to a mere collation of options for personal and private choice, as is sometimes feared by Christian church authorities, particularly in regard to secondary school religious education programs which seek to foster an understanding of other faiths. The aim of our interfaith endeavours is rather to develop a more profound sense, a deeper penetration, and a more acute appropriation of *our own* faith. It is an ever greater and deeper conversion of oneself to the faith which we brought to the

² See Robert Frager, *Heart, Self, Soul: The Sufi Psychology of Growth, Balance, and Harmony* (Quest Books: Wheaton, IL, 1999).

table of interfaith dialogue, and ever deeper entry into the mysteries we profess. For it precisely is in and through ever deeper conversion to the faith that we hold, that the face of the other is newly and grace-fully disclosed to us, in all its beauty and goodness, and revealed to us as “the glory of God,” created and loved by God, the one God whom we both profess.

The goals we strive for in interfaith dialogue are not unlike the lofty goals we set ourselves in the task of education. In fact, the two endeavours are not unrelated. The words spoken by English philosopher of education, Richard Stanley Peters resonate with profound meaning here: “To be educated is not to arrive at a destination it is to travel with a different view.”³ In this regard, interfaith dialogue bears much in common with our endeavours in education. It too is not a destination, but rather a journey, an encounter, a process of transformation, the goal of which to travel with a different view, our eyes and our ears, our hearts and our minds, newly attuned to our brothers and sisters of other faiths. The different view we hope to emerge is one of respect, tolerance, empathy and appreciation, and the new vista one of harmony and peace, justice and reconciliation. Furthermore, as Vatican II’s document, *Nostra Aetate*, expressed it, we do this for the sake of “mutual understanding and to promote together for the benefit of all, social justice, moral values, peace and freedom” (*Nostra Aetate* 3).

Lessons from ecumenical dialogue

Interfaith dialogue, compared to ecumenical dialogue (i.e., dialogue between the different Christian denominations), is a relatively recent newcomer in the history of Christianity. The Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, for example, has roots as far back as mid-nineteenth century, though it was not until 1908 that it was officially established as a world-wide event in the Christian Churches, a year that is now taken as the commencement of the ecumenical movement.⁴ The experience of a century of concerted efforts in ecumenical relations offers lessons for reflection and helpful notions to bring to interfaith dialogue. In the course of recent decades, ecumenists have developed two notions in particular which have much to offer, notably “spiritual ecumenism” and “receptive ecumenism.”

Spiritual ecumenism and a focus on personal conversion

In ecumenical dialogue, the notion of “spiritual ecumenism” has emerged as a particularly useful expression, indeed a core value.⁵ Spiritual ecumenism recognises that ecumenical encounter is a matter not just of the head but of the heart. Indeed, it acknowledges that genuine dialogue is first and foremost a matter of the heart, and only then, indeed much later, a matter of the head. It insists that it is only on the basis of a meeting of *hearts* that we can really appreciate – indeed even dare to think we have some understanding of - each others’ faith and spirituality. This same principle applies just as surely to interfaith dialogue. It too is first and foremost a matter of a meeting of hearts, which involves a listening with the ears of the heart and a seeing with the eyes of the heart.

³ R. S. Peters, “Aims of Education – A Conceptual Inquiry,” in R. S. Peters (ed.), *The Philosophy of Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 11-58, at 20.

⁴ The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, the centenary of which is to be celebrated in 2010, is also counted as another defining moment in the history of the ecumenical movement, though no Roman Catholics or Orthodox Christians were invited to attend.

⁵ For a classic treatment of spiritual ecumenism, see Cardinal Walter Kasper, *A Handbook for Spiritual Ecumenism* (New York: New York City Press, 2006).

What is especially challenging and refreshing about the notion of “spiritual ecumenism” is that it points to *conversion* as the critical factor upon which progress in the dialogue depends. It recognises that progress is really only possible on the basis of a continual process of conversion, “a change of heart and of holiness of life.”⁶ The expression “spiritual ecumenism” thus throws *conversion* itself into sharp relief. But note that the conversion we speak of here is not a conversion of the other with whom I am in dialogue to the faith that I hold or to the doctrines and understandings in which I believe, but *my own change of heart, my own growth in holiness, my own conversion!* It is definitely not a matter of conversion to one or another particular faith, far from it, but rather of conversion to God as revealed to us, each in our own tradition. The focus of attention is thus shifted away from ourselves and our religious institutions toward God, the One in whom we place our faith. The issue, then, is not that the other may be converted to our view and to our particular faith understanding, but that we, each and all of us, may all be drawn closer to God, enter more deeply into the mystery of God, be converted and conformed ever more closely to God, thereby to become truer images of God in the world, to see the world as God sees it, and to see each other as God sees and loves us, all of us. Interfaith dialogue then is not simply an end in itself; in this sense too, it is not a destination. It is deeper entry into the mystery of God and into the mystery of God’s love for the world and God’s work in the world. In this way, spiritual ecumenism serves to focus our attention not on ourselves and on our religious institutions as such, but on giving ever *more effective and convincing witness* to God in and for the world, as we ourselves enter ever more deeply into the mystery we profess.

Receptive ecumenism and the focus of reception of each other’s gifts

Another notion that is taking root and proving very helpful and constructive in ecumenical dialogue is the notion of “receptive ecumenism.”⁷ While complementary to the notion of spiritual ecumenism, the two present quite different perspectives and emphases. Where spiritual ecumenism points to the meeting of hearts and the conversion that is essential to genuine dialogue, receptive ecumenism points to an ethic and strategy for dialogue. It shifts the focus of the encounter away from our dialogue partner learning *from us*, to our learning and receiving, with integrity, *from the other* with whom we are in dialogue. Receptive ecumenism also throws into particularly sharp relief the need for *each faith tradition to accept responsibility* for receptivity, for learning from the other, and for receiving each other’s particular gifts. In comparison with spiritual ecumenism, it places a particularly high stress on our responsibility in ecumenical encounter.

The notion of receptive ecumenism also underscores the critical importance of the virtues of humility, respect, and openness in ecumenical dialogue, an openness and humility which is necessarily matched by utmost integrity and respect for one’s own faith. Again, there is no question of relinquishing one’s own faith tradition nor of setting aside or muting the doctrines central to it, but the emphasis and the focus in receptive ecumenism is on listening and receiving from the other, rather than on speaking and giving to the other.

Facilitating interfaith dialogue

⁶ As the Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), expressed it: “This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name ‘spiritual ecumenism’” (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 8).

⁷ For a recent overview of the principles, convictions and assumptions involved in “receptive ecumenism,” see Paul D. Murray, “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs,” *Louvain Studies* 33 (2008): 30-45.

These two notions from ecumenical dialogue, appropriately transposed into the new context of endeavours in interfaith relations with due recognition of the differences that pertain there, offer helpful conceptual scaffolding to the task of interfaith dialogue. Together they shift the focus of attention from a search for consensus or correspondence in matters of doctrine toward a focus on a meeting of hearts and reception of each other's insights. They then prompt attention to the issue as to how best, at a practical and local level, to facilitate the meeting of hearts and the reception of each others' gifts.

The burgeoning interest and efforts in interfaith endeavours in recent years, with a flourishing of neighbourhood groups and community networks committed to interfaith relations, offers many fine instances of creative and effective interfaith undertakings. Such efforts include initiating opportunities for sharing each others' stories, and listening to and learning from each other, as well as occasions for sharing each other's work and recreation, each other's joys and sorrows, pleasures and hurts. Pope John Paul II's momentous call to leaders of the world religions to a day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 1986 tangibly demonstrates the importance and potential for opportunities to pray together. Perhaps most important, because most basic, are the opportunities for eating together, enjoying each others' company, and developing friendships and collaborations. Hospitality, most of all, gives powerful tangible expression to receiving each others' gifts.

Australian indigenous leader, Pat Dodson, once famously commented in words to the effect that we in Australia would have made real progress in reconciliation when most Australians had at least one indigenous person's name and contact details in their address books. So too in interfaith relations; we too will have made real progress when most members of our community have the names and contact details of at least some believers of other faiths in their address books. In other words, the task of advancing interfaith relations is to facilitate and nurture the building of webs of interfaith friendships, and the trust and respect that are inherent in them.

To live religiously is to live interreligiously

One of the great challenges – and indeed a blessing – of our time is this new sense of urgency for interreligious dialogue. Never before has interfaith dialogue in the cause of peace been more urgent, given the development of the weapons of mass destruction of unparalleled capacity for devastation. On the other hand, perhaps never before have the possibilities for interfaith dialogue been as great, with unprecedented levels of globalisation and international migration, and consequently more of the world's population now living in culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse neighbourhoods.

In our time, to live religiously is to live interreligiously. To live religiously and interreligiously is to keep talking, keep learning from each other, keep opening our minds and our hearts to each other, and working ever more closely together to help build a better, more just, more hospitable and more peaceful world. The world needs us to enter into interfaith dialogue. The world needs us to collaborate in the interests of peace, reconciliation, economic justice, political stability and a healthy and sustainable environment. None of us dares to presume that we have the full grasp of the mystery of God. Our God is so much greater and more mysterious than the limits of our meagre understanding. Similarly, the horizon of what God is doing in the world is boundless, way beyond our comprehension. We have so much to learn about our own faith, so much to learn from each other, and so many gifts to receive from each other.