

LIMITS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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Abstract: The interreligious dialogue, defined as ‘organized encounters between people belonging to different religious traditions,’ has become a social necessity nowadays due to the pluralistic world we all live in. It is imperative for all religions and confessions to engage such mutual encounters for multiple reasons, as the civil society demands to all its inhabitants and social actors to get together into an agreement for public peace and harmony. Despite the need of engaging the interfaith dialogue, it is essential for the participants and initiators of it to know the best way of doing it, and for that, the first step is to acknowledge what are the obstacles this dialogue has. Many times we will be surprised to see that the normal prerequisites that are used in other types of dialogue are not actually working for the interreligious one due to several limitations. This is not an exhaustive article about these obstacles, but it is a start reviewing the deepest, not necessarily the most obvious ones.

Keywords: religious pluralism, acceptance, tolerance, preconceptions, obstacles, interfaith

Introduction

It is a commonplace that our world has become plural in more than one way. More than five billion human beings – some male, some female; some rich, many more poor; some yellow, some brown, some black, some white; some at peace, some at war; some Christian (1.95 billion), some Muslim (1 billion), some Hindu (777 million), some Buddhist (341 million), some of new religious movements (128 million), some of indigenous religions (99 million), some Jewish (14 million), some of no

religion at all (1.1 billion). What meaning and what opportunities does this rich ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism that characterizes God's world today have for our lives and our mission of evangelization?¹

We live in a pluralistic world in so many ways and instances that religious pluralism can no longer be regarded as an unacceptable and disputable exotism within any region of the world. How can we better master the art of leading in dialogue such diverse and, in most aspects, opposed communities? What is the key to guarding such a mandatory tête-à-tête? The best start for this is knowing the limits and limitations imposed by such an interreligious dialogue.

From numerous issues that hinder interfaith spirituality

Expected to ensure the feeling of safety, both in this world as fighting for peace [inside each individual as well as outside, inter-individuals], as for the next one safeguarding an afterlife position of welfare, religion(s) has failed this role on several levels due to its internal structure. The contemporaneous society demand from religions to rethink this internal structure according to the world pluralism and to reconsider position on all those prevailing ideologies of conflicting social domains. It is thus imperative that religions, monotheistic or not, national, universal, or local, to enter a dialog with others just to ensure the civil society that they are willing to talk, to engage their people from a peaceful angle and not from a debating, anxious, and rather conflictual one. Since we are at various levels of interfaith dialogue abroad, some already have it, others can already teach about it, while others barely started, it is imperious to know the reasons that withhold most religious people to engage such dialogue. It is obvious that we cannot expose them all today, but we can draw a line with the obvious ones just to understand from where to start or how to engage people in such situations.

a) The interreligious dialogue is not for anyone

First of all, who can engage such dialogue and whom it is not allowed to? It is of common sense to state that the interreligious dialogue is not for anyone, especially for the uninitiated. There are so many people with good intentions that I have met in my career, people that would do

1 John A. Coleman S.J., "Inter-Religious Dialogue: Urgent Challenge and Theological Land-Mine", in *AEJT (Australian eJournal of Theology)*, Vol 11, No 1, 2008,

anything to settle down the conflicts, but they were factually wrong in the methods they used and in the words or attitudes they hold, that they done more bad to this dialogue than good. Even being open to the wrong kind of people about the idea of interfaith dialogue can do more harm to this healthy principle than we can imagine. That is why this type of dialogue was mostly made indoors, in private by most its engagers and this is still another attitude that impedes ecumenical spirituality, for it brings suspicion and anxiety. On the other hand, I encountered uninitiated in interfaith people that did not know any theoretical principle to do it. Instead they simply live it in full in their lives; e.g. interfaith marriage, interfaith neighbors, interfaith coworkers, etc. They were never prepared to have such dialogue, but they have a deal with it in such manner that has succeeded better than their religious leaders had.

Plurality implies connectedness. Globalization has made the inhabitants of this planet aware of their differences. Therefore, if it is not for anyone to engage such a dialogue, it should probably be engaged by anyone who can, so that no community is left aside without proper introduction in the interfaith dialogue. "Open access to society and world communities at large not only brought people into contact but multiplied divergences. Any claim or statement purporting to have fundamental and/or universal implications must be prepared to be tested in this worldwide forum. The world has become a global village, and modern communication technology links the most outlying communities to the worldwide network. A global citizenry is developing."²

However, the real question is here not who can engage such dialogue from a social position, but from the religious realities. Because it is most improbable for one to search for dialogue with the religious Other"³ being faithful to its own faith while honoring *Others* with different, even opposed faith. "Can an abiding fidelity to the theological positions and values of

2 Jaco Beyers, "A historical overview of the study of the theology of religions", in *HTS Theological Studies/Teologiese Studies*, suppl. 12, 73(6)/2017, a4837. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i6.4837>

3 The other here refers to the fellow human observer and practitioner of another faith; it bears no metaphysical or transcendent reference point to the divine which is variously constructed as being other than human. Making room for the religious other requires in this instance a desire to create a habitus for deep and meaningful dialogue and encounters to happen. [From Seforosa Carroll, *Making Room For The Religious Other: Reading Interfaith Dialogue And Encounters In The Australian Context From A Feminist Diasporic Perspective*. Doctor of Philosophy thesis, submitted to Charles Sturt University, November 2015, 9-10.

one's religious community allow one to acknowledge the cognitive and spiritual integrity of other faith commitments?"⁴ Would it be offensive to stand as a human being instead of stating a religious creed? In other words, it would be considered of a lower dignity the human status in front of that of a religious one? "Are Christian and Jew sooner Christian and Jew than human beings?"⁵ Indeed, for most religious partisans they "value not because they are human, but because they are Christians"⁶ (i.e., religious). Thus, the legitimate question it would bring forward the non-religious anxiety, that if the human status is of lower matter than that of its particular quality, i.e. of religiosity? What would then be the human progress any religion sustains and promises to its partisans, the enhancement it should bring for each vassal? Instead, the feelings and emotional impulses it brings forward when speaking of Others prove the opposite. It is a hard choice and struggles only to find persons willing to start a mere conversation with religious others. Moreover, even more disturbing to see that, when engaging such conversations, many of those first proved willingly to discuss, and then quickly lit the diplomacy of dialogue and give up the fair play. In this regard I have said that the dialogue is not for anyone; instead we should be very careful about the characters and type of personality we bring into dialogue. As an example of *not to*, we will add to the uninitiated, those who are eccentric, godly, or that fanatic, enthusiast, extremist, with rather radical vision over what religion should be. This is just a measure of precaution, but the real explanation is that these categories of believers are not at all interested in having outside conversations, as if it would bring no improvement to their religiosity. If they are not expandable, whiling to share their faith, to proselytize, they are on the contrary, simple-minded and considering that their religious beliefs should be kept to themselves in their own private spaces, and not to show them off in public spaces. Either they take their religious private, into their own space, or they bring it with them everywhere, as a prideful identity, neither one would be a good (i.e.

4 Paul Mendes-Flohr, "The Promises and Limitations of Interfaith Dialogue", in *Criterion*, vol 50.1/2013, 4.

5 Cf. "Nathan: ... Sind Christ und Jude eher Christ und Jude, als Mensch? Ah! Wenn ich einen mehr in Euch gefunden hätte, dem es genügt, ein Mensch zu heißen." Lessing, *Nathan der Weise*, II, 6, lines 523-526. *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1993), vol. 9:533.

6 *Ibidem*, Act II, (Sittah)

fair play) partner of discussions with *others*. But, instead of giving up on persons that are most active for completing this interfaith dialogue and leave it only on the hands of those who can engage it 'objective', e.g. atheists, non-believers or non-affiliated, we should bring the devotees into this dialogue after forming them for it and giving them the proper tools to do it decently. And this is the true and right method because no one else would be interested in speaking for your creed, instead of you, in your place. No one else would be willing to giving up time, energy, and other resources if he does not believe in the core of this dialogue. Who else but you, the abiding faithful to your theological background and values, would stand and propose it into a dialogue with peers? But, this again should be done with proper tools and instruction.

Who are most provoked to answer the problems of interfaith, religious leaders, ordinary people, theologians or others? "The challenge is perhaps more poignant when formulated from the perspective of religious educators: How is one to instruct youth in the religious beliefs and values of their community while encouraging them to be tolerant of beliefs and values deemed to be incompatible with their own? How is one to educate youth to have firm moral and faith convictions, while encouraging them to honor opposing positions?"⁷ And the tools or the means a teacher is forced to use in such education are essentially wrong or over exaggerated, for he would probably emphasize on his own religious teachings while claiming that others are wrong [why don't merely different?!], or pointing on the theological and axiological differences that divide various faith communities and thus demand for tolerance on others. The fact is though that the differences are not always so superficial, however, but the approach has always been. "Surely, this challenge would be banal were tolerance interpreted merely as a code of "live and let live," or construed as a demand to dismiss differences between religions"⁸. In fact, it should be stated in each religious faith and believe what we have said earlier, that the status of being religious should never cancel out that of being human with all the responsibilities and rights that come from it.

b) Ignoring or emphasizing the inter-religious differences

There are many patterns of leading in dialogue various religious communities and the foremost proposal is to seek out for what is common

7 P. Mendes-Flohr, "The Promises and Limitations...", 4.

8 *Ibidem*.

in our faith, and leave aside what differentiates us. This would be a psychological approach with common assets if it would be, for example, a mediation between two groups that are in dispute. But there are so many hindrances that intervene in this dialogue that precisely ignoring or emphasizing the inter-religious differences causes a major difficulty. If someone takes his faith seriously, he should also keep in mind that others would most probably do the same. As another prerequisite in this faith exhibition we should understand that while “one takes one’s own faith seriously, one must perforce demand that others take one’s faith seriously, even if but to protest”⁹. There are many theologians and not only, who consider building an interreligious dialogue simply by ignoring interreligious differences. They simply overlook the basics of the religions in question and want to promote the dialogue based on the theological leveling technic. “Taking his own faith seriously, Rosenzweig¹⁰ unflinchingly insisted that the differences between Judaism and Christianity are not merely matters of folklore and contrasting cultural inflections.”¹¹ It should be clearer that interreligious dialogue seeks to build bridges between different faiths and religions and the aim is for all to understand that, in the splendor of the human heart, across every culture and time, man and women seek to understand and approach the transcendent and how it can be a blessing and a grace for them and their lives to have it the way it occurs. *Interreligious dialogue recognizes that man and women find different pathways to the transcendent, and it understands that the authentic interreligious dialogue recognizes the duty for us all to be faithful to our own religious traditions in dialogue. And in that faithfulness discover the richness of other faiths and religions which binds us together and also those elements which set us apart within the same aim. We are all searchers in this world for the most essential human question that defines us, the question of who we are, why are we human in this world and ultimately what is our destiny as man and human in this life and beyond it?*¹². Interreligious dialogue is an authentic effort of the participants of it to testify of the unity of the

9 *Ibidem*.

10 The German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886 –1929).

11 *Ibidem*.

12 Bishop Robert McElroy, member of the USCCB’s Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. “What is Interreligious Dialogue?”2015. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/u1Z1mF5_GLw on 5.09.2018.

humanity, to discover in all the religions pathways to the transcendent, to build bridges on those common pathways and to recognize the differences which exist and not to let them become barriers or sources of antagonism. The interfaith dialogue is but a mirror to see in our relations with others an encounter of the heart and the soul, and respect and reverence for every man and woman who have been created on this Earth. In that culture of encounter, in dialogue with other faiths, in theological dialogue which is sophisticated, and the dialogue between communities coming together in prayer and in service – in all of these ways, interreligious dialogue makes us all one in our humanity while recognizes that there are different pathways to God which must always be.

The differences that exist between all kinds of faiths are not to be ashamed of, to bury them, to coffin them from public debates just to see a dialogue of peace. If we do that then the dialogue itself is useless, the otherness transforms merely into a chimera, and we will have only an endless series of versions of the same religion with inflections that are merely visible or worthy to be made visible. If we reduce those differences to the ground and try to level all religions that will make us indifferent of who others are and feel, as well as saying that to ourselves. If there are no differences that matter, than we have no religions to know, no particularities to acknowledge, and no dialogue for these to be discussed. On the contrary, if we emphasize on our differences we will also have not a dialogue, but an endless series of voices instead of the echoes that were in the earlier scenario. This way, foregrounding the differences we all have in our faiths, keeps us apart from the best of this dialogue. It does not matter if we all have good teachings or essential knowledge from our forefathers to share, beautiful words from each of our traditions, as long as we all stuck in patterns of behavior and never stop talking and start listening.

c) Tolerance as a theological virtue

While talking about ignorance [i.e., of the differences between us], it is essential to have a clear statement about what is in principle the method of approaching interfaith dialogue by tolerance. Indeed, while for some tolerance is a key principle of interfaith, “live and let them live too,” for others tolerance is but a blemish that stains the dialogue through the ignorance that follows. It is a normal rumination to see tolerance as a drawback by ignorance because, in this acceptance, the dialogue is no

longer a proposal that stands. In the best of liberal circles, marching under the banner of tolerance, “the Christian ignored the Jew in order to tolerate him, and the Jew ignored the Christian in order to allow himself to be tolerated.”¹³

When the interfaith dialogue is regarded as a tool, leverage of obtaining a greater good (social tranquility mostly), then tolerance is the best choice we have to achieve and perform interreligious dialogue. In societies where interfaith causes social damages and major disturbances, dialogue through tolerance is a key concept that needs to be emphasized. “With the processes of globalization, inter-religious dialogue has been utilized as the contemporary measure not only to resolve disputes but more importantly, increase tolerance and prevent conflicts from arising.”¹⁴ In places with insurmountable potential for violent conflicts as Kenya or India or other places tolerance is the least religious leaders and those engaged in the discussion can do to prove to civil society religion is not a threat and a conflictual way of existence, but a way of peace and communion. Intolerance and fanaticism are saw as drawing backs for humanity and inadequate for any religious principles whatsoever. “The history of interfaith dialogue is as ancient as the religions worldwide, and recent history records many examples of interfaith initiatives and dialogue,”¹⁵ for everywhere in the empires, religious pluralism was a fact to deal with for the politicians. While suppressing some and encouraging others was a disastrous policy, encouraging tolerance within a diverse nation with people of various faith backgrounds was seen as a virtue, both political and theological one.

Of course, there were times in history when tolerance was deemed a heresy as a “careless indulgence.” It is only with the emergence of the modern state as a fundamentally secular institution, concerned preeminently with public tranquility as a condition necessary for collective prosperity, that tolerance lost its pejorative sting and became a civic and moral virtue. Moreover, this is not yet accepted for a theological

13 Franz Rosenzweig to Martin Buber, letter dated March 9, 1924, Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, Part 1, vol. 2: *Briefe und Tagebücher* (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 947.

14 Allan Kalafa Kefa and Ombuge M. Moses, *Manual for Interreligious Dialogue*, Chemchemi Ya Ukweli - The Active Non-Violence Movement in Kenya, 2012, 7.

15 *Ibidem*, 20.

virtue by some religions. Those still consider it as a cheap tool of the week, merely new, and rather insignificant confessions. Since the later seems to have a small influence on the people and without any chance in a theological confrontation, this secular imposed measure is, in most cases, rigid accepted or in some cases denied by the mainstream. There are even cases of disobedience on behalf of believers to their religious leaders' will of tolerance towards dissidents. It is notorious the responses of Orthodox nations to their religious leaders after signing The Pan-Orthodox Council (19 to 26 June 2016, Kolymvari, Crete - Greece) official documents, not to mention that previously it was a considerable deal pronouncing and having unanimity in this Orthodox World Council about the relations of the Orthodox Church with Heterodox¹⁶.

In the other case, regarded as a blissful ignorance, tolerance is nothing to be desired. It is from this perspective that T. S. Eliot exclaimed, "The Christian does not wish to be tolerated."¹⁷ No religious faithful would ever desire such status of being tolerate as ignored to his creed and religiousness manifestation; anyone would rather wish to express his feelings and theological faith, even publically, and for that acceptance is more than mere tolerance. Tolerance must not be appointed as a formal ignorance, "I leave you be", but as a flawless respectful acknowledge by others. It is in human nature to share and partake of other's creed. "But if tolerance is to be more than merely a by-word for relativism, then it must, indeed as Goethe suggested, entail a determined resolve to honor the divergent beliefs and practices of the other, not as incidental but as a central aspect of the religious experience and identity of the other. In other words, the religious beliefs and theological commitments of the other must be taken seriously, even should they clash with one's own."¹⁸

In **conclusion**, no one would rather embrace the status of tolerant or the relations with *Others* within this context of tolerance. The differences between religions and confessions make the whole point in having a genuine dialogue of embracing one to each other. Only through

16 Its fourth document, about *the Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World*. https://www.holycouncil.org/-/rest-of-christian-world?_101_INSTANCE_VA0WE2pZ4Y0I_languageId=en_US

17 T. S. Eliot, "The Idea of a Christian Society," in Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York, 1949).

18 P. Mendes-Flohr, "The Promises and Limitations...", 6.

this dialogue can we reveal that in our hearts we are close, and we can become more complete human beings, we can be of more authentic support to one another. Thereby, comprehending the richness of all our traditions and the evolution of the religious thinking, we will better appreciate that we are all chosen people, not for a certain kind of religion, but for them all; not one despite all others, but all together embracing the parts of us that we are defined by. This way differences bond us in dialogue, acceptance takes the place of the ignorant tolerance, and anyone who cares for peace and praises God is entitled to such dialogue.

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