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The Meaningful Truth of God

The dialogue between religions is a relatively new phenomenon in the way we are trying to approach it now. Christianity has had a tendency towards self-sufficiency in her attitude towards other religions, but within the past few decades we have had a more open approach and acknowledged truth in other religions. Before entering dialogue we have to examine ourselves critically to develop this open attitude. We must address some of the basic issues in Christianity to find out if we are ready and willing to enter dialogue. One of these issues is the concept of truth. If Christianity does not represent the truth, which fills us completely, then we are not in the presence of God. But at the same time we have to accept and be ready to learn from the truth represented by other religions. This can be seen as a paradox.

Engaging in the Dialogue of the Ages

On an international level there has always been interaction between the different faiths of the world. People of different faiths have been living side by side for centuries; they have laughed, starved, eaten, had hope and been in despair together. Sometimes the interaction has been of a more brutal kind: wars, killing or the seizure or burning of each other's property.

In the Arab world dialogue flourished earlier, as philosophical and theological debates were vivid with intertextuality and shared philosophical interests, which formed its basis. Muslims taught Christians and vice versa.

This was primarily in the Humanist Renaissance of Islam (945–1055), where e.g. the Christian Yahya IBN ADI, who had been a disciple of the Muslim AL-FARABI, became the mentor of a new generation of philosophers, amongst whom we find the prominent Muslim theologian and philosopher MISKAWAYH¹.

The picture now is quite different and to a much larger degree defined by distrust and fear, which really distorts the picture of the other religion and makes common research very difficult and dialogue necessary to rebuild relations.

¹ LEIRVIK Oddbjørn, *Knowing by Oneself, Knowing with the Other*. In AL-DAMIR, *Human Conscience and Christian-Muslim Relations*. Oslo, 2002.



In the Western world the picture is quite different, as they in their history did not have the same openness towards other ways of thinking and religions – at least not during the periods where the Arab world was open for this dialogue and cooperation, nor to the same degree as we have seen it in the Arab world.

Where the Arab world from the beginning of Islam has been more multicultural, the Western world has historically had a tendency towards monoculture. Relations have not been completely closed, though, as commercial relations have been pulsating throughout the ages and Europe has gained vast amounts of knowledge and philosophy from the Arab countries in the Middle Ages, which gave Europe a boost for her development into what she is now.

Dialogue as we now see it seems to differ from earlier interaction between the Western world and the Arab world because it is done with a difference in attitude towards the other religion, at least in Europe. Both worlds seem to be opening up towards each other on a fundamental level in religious dialogue, while we paradoxically seem to distance from each other politically.

It is officially accepted by most churches that other religions do have access to the truth of God. Some of the most beautiful statements of this insight are found in the Roman Catholic documents of the Second Vatican Council.

Being Evangelical-Lutheran and thus of another denomination, I take the liberty of underlining official papers of a specific denomination in this ecumenical setting. Especially the documents *Lumen Gentium*, *Ad Gentes* and *Nostra Aetate* give a basic understanding on how we can approach interfaith dialogue and other religions.

These documents state that we do have access to the fullness and abundance of God's truth. But they also state that we are not the only ones holding the truth; that others may also have had a revelation from God.

Obstacles to Dialogue

In dialogue with another religion, we have to differentiate between what religion is and what it is not. There is a whole array of obstacles for dialogue to overcome. I will list some of these²:

Insufficient grounding in one's own faith; lack of understanding of the other belief; historic and contemporary socio-political factors; culture, economics and ethnicity; wrong or insufficient understanding of such terms as conversion, baptism and dialogue; self-sufficiency; lack of trust: suspicion towards the motives of the other in dialogue; polemic intentions in expressing religious convictions.

At the top of the list (which is not prioritised in any other way) is the understanding of one's own faith. It is crucial and fundamental to know who and what we are, if we are to share our faith with others.

We have a lot to give, but we need to know it well enough in order to express it. Before entering dialogue we also need to discuss what dialogue means for us as Christians. Therefore we need to address the question of truth,³ since an exclusive concept of truth could make the dialogue fruitless.⁴

² In accordance with an unpublished paper of VERDOSCIA Luciano.

³ It should be noted that this article is written in a Western liberal tradition and directed to the Western world. It is meant as self-critique and examination, and is only appropriate as such. Dialogue must begin with admitting and omitting one's own flaws and thus being worthy of entering into relationship with the other. Of course the procedure of self-examination is an ongoing process, but it must not be allowed to constitute a self-image, as we indeed have a lot to give.

⁴ In my work as a liaison officer I am employed to enter dialogue at al-Azhar University. The Grand Imam at al-Azhar is the head of the Sunni Muslims, which make up 90 per cent of Muslims worldwide, or 900.000.000.000 people. He said at a meeting with the archbishop of the Anglican Church that "we believe in the same [Creator] God, but we come from different countries." The Anglican Church and al-Azhar have signed a paper stating exactly this. This article is an attempt to take this seriously in European theological tradition.

Truth in History

As a discussion within Christianity, we all agree that God is the infinite One; so great that we cannot possibly comprehend the vastness of God's being, as we cannot understand the wondrous actions of God. For instance, the very attempt to explain that Jesus Christ was both God and human is in itself condemned as blasphemy by the Church fathers.

We bow our heads in humbleness when confronted with the mysteries of God. But this seems only to be in living out and discussing faith within the Christian churches. At the moment we turn towards other religions, we have felt the need for clearly defined borders of Christianity to separate ourselves from the other.

We have had an apologetic tendency, as we felt the need to protect ourselves and our faith from other religions. We of course need some definition of the divine in order to adhere to it. But these definitions do not have to be done in opposition to other religions; they can be done positively within our faith.

At approximately the same time as Immanuel KANT formulated his philosophy and forged his bronze heaven of reason in accordance with an Aristotelian tradition of logic, industrialization conquered the thought and life of the Western world.

The limits of human accomplishment were seen as endless, slowed only by time, as reason needed time to realize itself in humanity. This reason was thought to be incarnated in Western civilization, and thus it was the God-given mission of the Western world to bring light – in the forms of efficiency and productivity – to the rest of the world.

In exchange, the rest of the world had to deliver the raw material that the Western world needed for further development. This industrialization went hand in hand with the spreading of the gospel.

But this mission did not only spread the gospel; it spread the gospel of the Western Industrialized World. Everything that was not born from the light of incarnated reason was darkness – including Islam and all other living faiths.

In this approach to the world dialogue is not possible, but only the spreading of this one truth. If we want interfaith dialogue as a true option, we will have to move beyond the modern way of thinking with a God-given reason, and the consequent arrogant self-understanding.

We need to approach the world in a much humbler way, which could mean that we are not the only ones holding the truth. As Christians we need to have an understanding of the concept of truth which exposes the vastness of God beyond our own borders.

The Truth of Reason

We cannot use the approach of reason and logic started by ARISTOTLE and coined for religion in the modern world by Immanuel KANT to define the concept of truth in religion. Even though KANT does speak of religion as that which is beyond reason, the concept of truth nevertheless has been defined to a large extent by the logical approach of KANT in Modernity. This might have some relevance, but not in the Christian religious definition of truth in the approach to other religions.

A core truth of Aristotelian logic is that A cannot be both A and B. An apple cannot both be an apple and a banana. As logic, it is obvious. But is it obvious when it comes to defining our conception of God?

The Church fathers stated long ago that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully human, without any mixture. They stated that God is one and yet three. These are basic Christian articles of faith and thus true for Christians.

But they do defy the classical and modern concept of logical formal truth, and as such they set us free when it comes to our perception of God. An apple might not be a banana, but God was for us most certainly God and yet also human.

We have already in Christianity defined God as defying logic, since logic is merely the structure God has chosen for God's creation; and reason is the way God's creation can develop knowledge in order to live in God's creation. Reason is a mere tool which will never be able to define God or the true meaning of life, but it can sustain the meaning given by faith in the world.

This clarification of logic connected to religion is not new. Most would agree with it. The point is that we must underline this clarification in connection with divine revelation in dialogue, and not as the earlier apologetic approach to other religions uses the formal truth of reason. Religious truth is not something contemplated by humans, but something given by God, and He gives it wherever and whenever he finds it fitting God's creation.

God in Culture

God has revealed Godself to the world, in the world. God is part of our history, where God throughout history has approached humans in their specific times and cultures. Here God has made Godself understandable to people. Culture is a term used to define the cognitive horizon⁵ of a specific area, as different areas develop different understandings of life and how to live it.

If you lived in the desert 1400 years ago, far from the rich soil of the Western shores, the moon would be the symbol of joy as the sun would be scorching you and your surroundings all day. You would be dependent on your tribe, and you would live in constant fear of other tribes wanting your food, as it would be very scarce. As there would be no gathering structures of a nation, you would be dependent on your tribe to avenge you if you were attacked. It would be your only security if some kind of unity was not created.

If you lived by the Western shores on the rich soils of Israel two thousand years ago, you would face a society which had lost its sense of unity. People would be becoming more and more individualistic, striving for their own prosperity; and because of this, religion for many was becoming something you do, not something you live.

What then is your meaning, your purpose and aim in life? How would God communicate with you? How would you understand, for example, the concept of love, which is so central to Christianity?

The sagas of Greenland preceding the Danish colonization are almost entirely stripped of the notion of personal love; they are directed against nature, which defined their life completely in the icy wastelands.

In the European romantic period, personal love between two people was elevated to the peak of meaning in life in a setting where nobility had way too much time on their hands. In all these different cultural settings, we of course do understand love differently.

But this must also have an impact on divine revelation. How can we talk about the love of God, if the word means something different in each situation? Would God not also reveal Godself to this culture – in accordance with the cognitive horizon of the culture? Could we understand God if God did not?

⁵ The term “cognitive” is used here to signify not just a rational approach to the world, but rather our full understanding of our place in the world as rational and spiritual beings.

Truth in Religion

Can there be only one truth from the One God? If there is only one truth, what then is this truth? Is it a truth written down once and for all, or is it the fullness and abundance of life; the meaning of life? And will this not develop during time and have different expressions in different cultures?

The truth of religion is not a truth taken by reason; it is a truth revealed to us if we are open to the meaning which is given to us by our Creator. We cannot grasp it with reason, and we definitely cannot call ourselves the owners of this truth.

But this does not mean that we do not hold the truth of God, and that our connection to God does not lead to God. In a more humble approach, inspired by the post-modern way of thinking, we can realize that our understanding of the world is limited by our own cognitive horizon.

We are born into a specific context which limits the borders of our understanding. In meeting with something that is not accounted for in our worldview, we will have to broaden our culturally-given horizon in order to get a fuller understanding.

This means that the culturally, religiously and geographically different have to be taken seriously in their own truth to the highest possible degree. After Christianity became the religion of state, some 1,700 years ago in many countries, this has not been our dominant way of thinking.

In the Western Christian world religious truth was confined in a very brutal way within geographical borders, which defined the borders of true civilization. Thus truth was being limited to the culture in which we were born. In our more multicultural setting, this is no longer the case. We start to see beyond the identity-creating borders of our own culture, into the truth of other cultures.

This does not mean that our culture loses sense. It rather means that other people might lead a life just as meaningful as ours without necessarily having the same cognitive horizons as we do. This is culture, and we must find out if it is also religion. We have realized that we cannot encompass the vastness of life and love of God, but also that we very well can live by exploring life and love in curiosity and humbleness.

My Truth or God in Me?

This concept of truth in religion when meeting with other living faiths does of course raise a string of questions, of which the most pressing might be: Where does it end? How far can we go in the acceptance of other religions?

Where are the limits? The answer given so far in this article is: You did not start it, and you cannot end it. God knows. But it might be enlightening to develop a bit further the personal issue of the question.

You know God. God has spoken to you. You have set the limits of God – in your life. These limits you have set to be able to relate to God. You have to. But you have only done this within your own cognitive horizon and tradition – from which you are not able to transcend by yourself.

The moment you put yourself in a genuine meeting with a person from another religion, or a person from within your own religion but with religious concepts different from your own, as we have done before and are doing now, you have the possibility to go beyond your own cognitive horizon and tradition through this other person.

This does not mean that you have to adopt the other cognitive horizon as your own, but it does mean that you have to take it seriously. The moment you take it seriously, you have a chance to grow and develop from the experience of entering another cognitive horizon.

Basically we are not able to set limits for God. The relationship to God is a trusting relationship with the unknown. The moment we conceive definitions of God is the moment religion turns into ideology and we start killing in God's name; and it is the moment we have moved as far from God as we possibly can. It really makes us usurpers to God's power.

Each of us lays claim to the truth of God. And we hold the truth of God. Dialogue is not an instrument to gather different pieces of the truth of God. Dialogue is not a jigsaw puzzle with a lot of pieces which have to be put together.

God is The Unknown. God is Love; Life; Joy – and God is with us in death and sorrow. God is the power of Life itself; we deny God by denying the person in front of us, as we by this defy Life Itself. This is the judgement which Matthew 25 speaks about.

God is the Unknown, but we know God in the most intimate way possible, as God is the One Who provides us with meaning. What we know about God is not something understandable; it is the basis of faith.

It might seem a paradox that we hold the truth and that is others, who believe in another way, also hold the truth. But this is only when we perceive truth as something we have taken or explored with rationality.

If truth is the faith given by God, which we basically do not understand but accept in faith, we cannot lay claim to it but only praise God that God has given God's creation God's meaningful truth.

Concentric Cognitive Circles of Faith

Friedrich SCHLEIERMACHER⁶ speaks of a hierarchy of truth in religion. In his opinion every religion holds some truth, but this truth is refined from animism to Buddhism to monotheism and ends in its most refined form in Christianity.

It is not hard to find some inspiration from Georg W. F. HEGEL, who also ends, not in Christianity, but in the rationality of Christian society as the ultimate expression of the *Imago Dei* in humanity.

The Roman Catholic church partially follows the same trail of thought in her explanation of the concept of Church or the “people of God” in *Lumen Gentium* as the mystical body of Christ, but it does differ in the fact that the Roman Catholic church does not have her starting and ending point in rationality, but in faith.

The Church finds her supreme expression in the Roman Catholic church. The Roman Catholic church is the centre. From here truth can be found in concentric circles in other Christian denominations; and at the farthest reaches of the concentric circles, even atheists have access to the truth of God, as they can live the life of a devoted, God-fearing person, as morality, mentality or spirituality.

I think these thoughts hold the truth that we can never completely separate ourselves from our own cognitive horizon. And that we never should do it, either. The goal of dialogue is not that we all think or believe in the same way, but that we are walking the road together in peace; entering and celebrating Life together.

SCHLEIERMACHER's basis of thinking is Western rationality, and it is not surprising that he ends up with a rational model of Christianity as the supreme expression of divinity. The Roman Catholic church does not try to rationalize her way to why she holds the truth.

She just points at Christ, and thus at the basis of her faith. Nor does she talk about Christianity as the only one holding the truth, but rather as the “crown” of belief. While SCHLEIERMACHER rationally deduces from animism to Christianity, the Catholic Church

⁶ SCHLEIERMACHER Friedrich, *Der christliche Glaube*. Berlin, 1984.

begins with her own faith and relates from this to other religions and cognitive horizons.

Cognitively this is how we believe; and how we can believe. Each of us is the centre of our cognitive horizon. And to this centre God speaks God's truth. We can try to broaden our horizon, but we will always be in the centre of it, and some ways of thinking will always be on the periphery of it.

Some will be outside of our cognitive horizon. This does not mean that we should give up on the centre to embrace another centre; it just means that the person in front of us will be in an equal centre and that this person can be a catalyst to broaden the horizon.

But this also implies that we cannot see the religion of the other, without seeing it from the centre of our own cognitive horizon. Christians will look for Christ in Islam, and Muslims will look for the truth of the Qur'an in Christianity. If this was not so, Christians would not be Christians and Muslims would not be Muslims.

We are, what we are, and as such we must take the other seriously. When the Egyptian Muslim writer AL-AQQAD⁷ wrote a biography of Christ, he did it as a Muslim, who took the Bible seriously as Holy Scripture, and enriched his own understanding of himself as a Muslim.

He did not see Christ as the son of God, but he deepened his own perception on Christ in Islam, as he emphasized the rule of love given by Christ as an integral part of Islam; as something, which he as a Muslim had to take seriously in order to be a Muslim.

God is Love, and in this setting it would be appropriate to bring forth the element of communication that is in love: God is the Communication of Life in Life that enables us to see the person in front of us as just as genuine as ourselves. In Georg W. LEIBNIZ' words, God is *harmony*, and this is what enables us to stand in front of this other centre and to take it seriously as a centre.⁸

The Aim of Dialogue

It is important to make one last point, and that is how we approach other living religions. What is the point of the meeting between religions?

First, the encounter does carry its own meaning. God has given God's meaning to God's creation, and in the dialogue we have the opportunity to give our thanks and praise together with the rest of creation.

Secondly, we also have an obligation to safeguard peace, and to create it wherever we do not find it. In the same way, we have an

obligation together to ensure the basic needs of creation as a whole. This is our duty as caretakers of the creation of God – both for Christians and Muslims.

Thirdly, in dialogue we also have the chance and possibility to root out our misconceptions of both Christianity and other religions, thus purifying our relations.

Finally, we have the chance to develop knowledge of our own belief. So far we have apologetically argued and defended the Holy Trinity when meeting with Islam, but in a positive dialogue with Islam, we might be able to develop a more profound concept of the unity of God, which would deepen our concept of the trinity of God.

In religions which are close to Christianity, we have the common use of some texts in faith and philosophy, and we can develop our readings by taking into account the exegesis of the others in a more serious way.

Conversion of the other in dialogue cannot be an aim, but we must respect the work of God if someone is called to be converted, as it is the will of God with this person, regardless if it is a Christian, a Muslim, or any other who is converting.

Suggested Reading

Decree Ad Gentes on the Mission Activity of the Church.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions Nostra Aetate.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

CHAPMAN Colin, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam*. Leicester, 1996.

LEIRVIK Oddbjørn, *Knowing by Oneself, Knowing with the Other*. In AL-DAMIR, *Human Conscience and Christian-Muslim Relations*. Oslo, 2002.

MOLTMANN Jürgen, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation: The Gifford Lectures 1984–1985*. London, 1985.

VATTIMO Gianni, *Crederci di credere*. Milano, 1996.

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⁷ LEIRVIK Oddbjørn, *Knowing by Oneself, Knowing with the Other*. In AL-DAMIR, *Human Conscience and Christian-Muslim Relations*. Oslo, 2002.

⁸ This way of thinking is developed from Georg W. LEIBNIZ' teachings in his *Monadology*, inspired by the interpretation by Jürgen MOLTMANN in *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation: The Gifford Lectures 1984–1985* (London, 1985).