Martin CONWAY

One Christian's View of Interreligious Dialogue

My purpose in this article is to lay out the large field of interreligious dialogue as a whole and as I have come to understand it, in hopes that one can think the matter through freshly and carefully. It needs fresh thought in the light of at least two unhelpful idealisms that I often meet.

The first is expressed by those who seem to think that good interreligious dialogue is going to be the answer to all our woes. The second arises in the fear that such dialogue will involve Christians (let alone others) abandoning our faith. Both are seriously misleading. So what do we need to say positively about it?

THE ESSENTIAL CONTEXT

My main area of interest has been how Christian theologians have been understanding interreligious dialogue. I have had the good fortune to work closely with two men who have opened up very significant opportunities of interreligious dialogue—Stanley SAMARTHA in the World Council of Churches (WCC), and Kenneth CRACKNELL in the British Council of Churches.

This article is no more than "one Christian's" attempt to see straight. The context within which you and I now live and pray is that of the all-out challenge facing humanity in this new XXIst century: Can we learn to live so as to allow our descendants to have a life on this planet in the XXIInd?

Any beginnings of an answer to that huge question must include responses to at least two slightly more specific ones: Can we overcome the threats of global warming? Can we learn to live together as a single human race in mutually health-giving relations with one another, solving our problems not by the violence on which we so often rely, but on patient negotiation and peace-seeking?

Relationships, and therefore dialogue, between the major world faiths are obviously a key sector within all this, if by no means the only one.

SEVEN VITAL CLARIFICATIONS

First, beware of the word "religion". Wilfred Cantwell SMITH wrote an epoch-making book to show that the nearer one comes to understanding what people mean by their "religion," the less valuable or true it is to use that word.

He suggests that we speak of "faith" when we point to the *invisible* heart of what any one person or group believes in, and of the "cumulative tradition" when we point to the buildings, ethical demands, social expectations, etc., any of the more *visible* things a "religion" may have given rise to.

Second, there is a vital distinction between discussing religious things (Cantwell SMITH allows the adjective) *from inside*, ie. as a (more or less) believer yourself, and *from outside*, as no more than an observer.

Watch out in particular when any speaker shifts from one mode to the other! In this article I am deliberately trying to maintain a view *from inside* the tradition to which I belong.

Third, each of the major faiths (I am not trying to include every possible movement that might consider itself a "religion") is distinctly and uniquely itself. None of them can at all truly and appropriately be generalised into some wider category (eg. "religion").

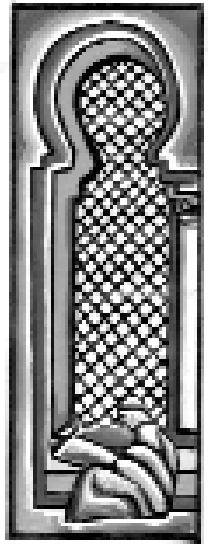
Fourth, religious disagreements are significant and serious. Never suppose that they do not matter. But this does not mean that they should be bypassed. Where you come across one, stop and consider it carefully, above all by listening to what your neighbour who follows a different faith than your own is actually saying when she or he sets out her or his belief and the reasons for holding to it.

Fifth, there is no neutral vantage point from which to evaluate them all. The matter of discovering an appropriate starting point for any evaluation of someone else's faith is one of the most sensitive, and of course disputed, questions in the entire field.

My own judgment is that one can only find that starting point in one's own faith—but not so as to be in any way unfair or judgmental, not so as to lose the respect of your partners in the other faiths. This inevitably involves much humility and care over the early stages of any dialogue.

Sixth, the major traditions are by no means only or primarily concerned with "religious things." Of course their members will wish to speak of God, or of what they consider the "ultimate" or "transcendental," as supremely important, but important for the whole of our living, for the way we treat our neighbours, the way we use our money, the kind of family life we pursue, etc.—by no means only for what we do at times of worship or on holy days.

Seventh and last, each faith tradition is full of its own sorts of diversity, with a rich and often awkward history, as well as lots of divergent movements in its contemporary life. Any real "dialogue" has to become to some extent aware of these and make allowances for them, without rushing to judgment.



PEOPLE MEET EACH OTHER

Already more than twenty years ago, under the leadership of Kenneth CRACKNELL, the British Council of Churches set out four simple but deceptively profound "principles," now available in *In Good Faith*.

The first one of these is to note that it is people, persons, not "religions" or "faiths," who meet each other. And, God be praised, we are all, as persons, entirely ordinary. Each one of us is, and can only be, her- or himself, unique and important to God, belonging to a community which matters to her or him.

At the same time, we may find ourselves meeting in all sorts of different contexts and with a huge range of possible motives, misunderstandings, hopes, etc., which will need to be taken into account in our dialogue.

Moreover, as mentioned above, we will not expect only and always to be discussing "religious things"; we will want to talk about whatever is mattering to each of us, as believers yet also as ordinary people, at that particular time.

This means in turn that there is an important distinction between the kind of "dialogue," which a Muslim mother and her Christian neighbour are likely to have over the garden fence and that which bigger groups of people may wish to have when, for instance, a Muslim imam and a Christian minister each ask ten of their members to share in a "dialogue evening."

Still more, this explains why it is likely to be considerably more sensitive and delicate when "official leaders" of any two or more faiths meet to talk and try to come to some conclusions about their relationships and common obligations.

In thinking of such people we can all start realising the possible "costs" of dialogue (by no means only in money), and who may have to pay them. In almost any dialogue the partners will become aware of vast differences of language, background, culture, etc., yet always also of a shared humanity which gives us common worries, concerns and joys.

In thinking about the latter, our differences will often seem less important than what we share as human beings. A Christian will see this as one of the fruits of our being created not as separate species, but all, whatever our differences, in the image of God.

MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND MUTUAL TRUST

Therefore listen, listen, listen to everything you may have expected, and much more. It is crucial in the early stages to begin realising "how they see us." All this will be undeniably challenging, yet often also strengthening one's appreciation of one's own faith (if not always of one's inherited tradition), in any case enriching and healthy.

Out of careful listening, on both and all sides, trust can slowly grow. Mutual trust is the all-important next stage, which is never easy, never to be taken for granted, yet a wonderful gift when it comes.

One learns, for instance, never to speak of others as "non-"something else, but rather to point to what they positively believe in; and to be constantly aware of the "golden rule": do as you would be done to, as a basic starting point. Only after reaching a real degree of mutual understanding and mutual trust can we hope to be able to speak sensitively together of the things that really matter to either of "us."

SHARING IN SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

Each partner will have her or his own particular emphases, cares and hopes, etc., but the purpose of coming to know one another lies not just in ourselves so much as in the wider community.

Dialogue is fulfilled as we together show that understanding and trust are possible and can lead to health-giving new initiatives, bringing hope for wider circles of humanity. Exactly what is worth attempting by way of service will also vary enormously, not least in function of local needs, let alone of local political circumstances, and of course on just who is available.

Each example of dialogue will have to come to its own decisions about what sort of service is worth attempting. But if dialogue does not result in some genuine reaching out, it may well wither.

THE MEDIUM OF AUTHENTIC WITNESS

In dialogue, there is no question of expecting one another to abandon one's own convictions or upbringing or sticking-points, etc. The whole point is to become aware of each other and what each brings by way of such things into the exchange.

This too is very much a matter of mutual listening and of mutual enrichment. We meet, not to manipulate each other, but as fellow-pilgrims into the fullness of truth and purposes each has become aware of in her or his own faith.

So the moment will almost certainly come, if never at a time of our own choosing, when one finds oneself having to respond to a question that touches on one's deepest, most central convictions, and/or finds oneself needing to ask about the partner's.

This is possibly the most important moment of all, since upon the way we respond now will depend the entire edifice of understanding and trust we have begun to build up in-between us in dialogue.

Christians will want, indeed need, to say that what happens then is up to the Holy Spirit, shown in the degree of love and care each of us can show to the other. Now of course the question of any sort of conversion from one faith to another is bound to be a particularly delicate one.

Moreover it has its own range of tricky, not to say baffling, complexities—for instance in the way it can and does arise in the many different situations of marriage across the divides between major faiths. Yet it is not a question that can ever simply be dismissed—either way, on.

There are at least two levels to this impossibility: Socially, no believer can expect to be able to witness adequately to a stranger. It is much more appropriate to find oneself struggling to explain something really crucial to a friend, with whom one has already established a real degree of mutual trust.

So while some particular conversation, probably in ways one could not have expected, may prove to be important, possibly crucial, to the other's faith pilgrimage, even to lead to a point of difficult and demanding decision, it is never only that one conversation that "converts." Any such decision must always be known and seen as part of a long-term whole, within a life-long pilgrimage into ever fuller truth and love.

And secondly, theologically: Christians see (know and expect, etc.) the guiding force in any vital conviction to be that of God the Holy Spirit, not something "belonging" to me or to my community.

What any person or group of persons discovers to be their proper obedience to the "Ultimate," lies within their responsibility. If any other "I" tries to press in on that responsibility, it can only harm the eventual outcome.

It is in no way our duty as Christians to try to make others become "like ourselves"; rather to explore with others the truth and love of God that we Christians feel we have glimpsed in Jesus Christ, so that God the Holy Spirit can speak to both parties in the dialogue freshly, perhaps convertingly.

There are many examples where a person coming newly into a profound faith can unwittingly re-kindle a tired faith in someone who has officially believed in it for years, yet without the freshness she or he now experiences thanks to the newcomer.

PILGRIMAGE INTO, OF AND FOR FRIENDSHIP

None of our major traditions, in its origins, saw itself as "opposed" to another. Yes, of course, there were tensions, in several cases from very early on (Jews and Christians, Hindus and Buddhists).

Still more, in almost all cases, our histories have bequeathed us many difficult, even disgraceful, episodes of hatred and destruction. Yet the crucially encouraging experiences have been those of friendship being discovered and growing, even in the midst of communal tension and strife.

Are there not enough such experiences in the long history (Saint Francis of Assisi and Sultan Saladin, for example), not least in the XXth century, to encourage us to believe that friendship can be won and can win out, provided that on all sides and from all starting points we are ready to meet at a depth where we allow ourselves to be positively enriched by one another?

A most notable exemplar in this way of pilgriage, now living not far from me in Oxford, is Bishop Kenneth CRAGG. As witnessed in his still-growing list of books, his knowledge of Islam and of the other major world faiths is second to none.

Still more, the respect in which he is held by Muslims in many places is a striking witness to his ability to reflect, in his speaking and writing, the best in a tradition other than the one he was brought up in.

His early books were already deeply promising. The long line since then, each dealing with a specific range of questions and historical material, is by now an unendingly fascinating library of spiritual and theological resource.

Happy are the communities where people of two or more different faith traditions can both learn as much from one another, and carry that through into shared action, as Bishop Kenneth CRAGG has done.

So, may all our hesitant attempts to open up some dialogue grow into experiences of friendship that can bear fruit not only for those immediately involved, but also for the wider traditions to which we belong and to the surrounding communities which can benefit from the understanding and trust that develops.

Suggested Reading

BOUQUET C., *Comparative Religion*. Harmondsworth, 1941.
CRAGG Kenneth, *The Call of the Minaret*. New York, 1956.
CRAGG Kenneth, *Sandals at the Mosque — Christian Presence amid Islam*. London, 1959.
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Mogens AMSTRUP

Interreligious Dialogue,

Multiculturality and Multireligiousness

What do we understand when we use the phrase "dialogue"? Dialogue has become a very modern and often-used phrase. It seems like everybody is talking about dialogue. Politicians talk about the importance of dialogue, but also we as the people of the Church talk about it: ecumenical dialogue and interreligious dialogue.

LOOKING BEHIND THE TERM "DIALOGUE"

The phrase is originally taken from Greek: *dia-logos*, literally meaning "through words." The words simply mean "talking together." Interchurch dialogue has existed for many years. But the XXth century has shown us that ecumenical dialogue is simply not enough.

The XXth century has, more than any other, brought people of different faiths close to each other. Before the XXth century, interreligious dialogue or experience of other faiths and religions were brought to us by missionaries far away from our own world.

But the world has changed and migration has started. Wars and conflicts around the world have brought people from places we barely knew existed close to our homes and often also to our hearts.

As a consequence of the European colonisation of other countries and regions, immigrants come to the far richer West and North of the world—a scene unimaginable just a hundred years ago. The world of today is globalised. Most of the nations of Europe live together no longer as single monocultures, but as a kind of pluralistic culture. And the world also has become much smaller.

Through mass media an attack on, for instance, the United States of America, is immediately brought into our living rooms and our consciences, and also brings reactions from around the world. And in the name of globalisation we react, and we are asked to react.

DIALOGUE IS ESSENTIAL

And here dialogue gets essential, not only in solving international crises, but also when I walk out of my room, my home, and suddenly meet my neighbour who turns out to be a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist or a person of no faith.

Suddenly I have to understand the plurality of my own world and I also have to face it. All religions are influenced by these forces in different measures. We also, Christians of Europe, are facing this situation.

The religious meeting no longer takes place "out there," but has become globalised and happens everywhere. We, the Christians of Europe, are facing these new times and tasks for our own belief at a time when Christianity in Europe has become quite secularised.

And with the multicultural also comes the multireligious. We as Christians have to face and handle this in a serious way. In Denmark there has been for the last 25–30 years an ongoing dialogue between Christians and people of other faiths.

In the beginning this was primarily between Christians and people from new religious movements, having their source in Hinduism