

LIVING WITH RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

Some Basic Theological Reflections on Interreligious Dialogue

Living with religious plurality has undeniably become a common feature throughout the world nowadays. Among the two hundred and twenty nation states presently in existence none is mono-religious any longer.¹ This poses an entirely new situation. Most of ordinary people have slowly come to realize that there are long-standing traditions of explaining the world and celebrating life differently from those they themselves have been raised in and become accustomed to, traditions cherished and lived by immigrants or refugees now residing in their immediate neighborhood. Moreover, the nearly daily reports of conflicts among people of different religions in Palestine, Iraq, and India and about atrocities committed by religious fanatics elsewhere around the globe indicate the urgent need for religious literacy. Religious literacy is needed not only to cope better with cultural diversity but also to distinguish competently between genuine religious issues and merely alleged ones that serve vested political, criminal or economic interests. The following reflections intend to stimulate a religiously competent coping with the situation to bring about and sustain peaceful coexistence amidst religious plurality.

Religious Plurality and Convivencia

What has nowadays become a concern for nearly everyone has actually always been such for the sovereigns of multicultural empires and the globetrotters of old. One needs only think of medieval Spain where Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived fairly peacefully together, a situation the historian Américo Castro (1885-1972) described as *convivencia*, a term rendered into English as “living togetherness” (Castro 1949; 1971).² By now *convivencia*, or convivencia, has become an accepted neologism in the English language, owing its present popularity to the late Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire (1921-1997) who

¹ For respective data see *Britannica Book of the Year 2009*, pp. 771-73.

² The term is found on p. 584 of the 1971 English version where Castro outlines a proposed future study project.

emphasized the necessity of the unconditional *convivencia* of people in power with the powerless, oppressed masses for the sake of establishing mutual trust in order to detect what is truly and genuinely borne communally so that unbearable situations are effectively opened for transforming actions.³ *Convivencia* thus understood stands for unconditional, unprejudiced living and acting together in a non-hierarchical, non-stratified community for the sake of the common good.⁴

Sometime later *convivencia* insinuated itself into theology in 1986 by an article entitled “Convivência: A Basic Pattern for Ecumenical Coexistence Today” by the German missiologist Theo Sundermeier, who argued that living with attention for one another, across the most diverse backgrounds, has to become the central priority and concern of all ecumenical efforts. Mutual differences ought not to interfere with actively living and coexisting together. Instead, we should avail ourselves of the opportunity to become involved in the experiment of sharing in learning, in helping one another, and in celebrating life together. For only in this way will a new communal experience emerge that, correspondingly, will effect change in consciousness. “The truth itself,” Sundermeier argued, calls “for *convivencia*,” for it is in this way that truth “allows itself to be discovered” (Sundermeier 1986: 99; cf. also Sundermeier 1992). Preference ought to be given to life actually lived, even if long-cherished convictions are thereby challenged. Theological insights, too, are no longer to be derived deductively from pre-established fixed systems only. Rather, they have to grow out of an unprejudiced, uninhibited life in community with significantly different others, because only in this way will they bear the impress and authority of life actually lived.

Since the publication of the above article, *convivencia* has become a popular household term in the literature of the field and a key concept in contemporary thought, within both the theology of religions and missiology (see Becker and Feldtkeller 2000; Park 2006).⁵ This is particularly true in connection with the development of a “hermeneutic of the stranger” (*Hermeneutik des Fremden*), which focuses on the analysis of life shared with those who are culturally dif-

³ Especially in his books *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) and *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1974). See also Freire and Horton 1990.

⁴ It is worth noting that several Paulo Freire Institutes have been established around the world in Spain, Malta, Israel, Finland, South Africa, and the USA.

⁵ In March 2008 the Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles hosted a national research conference on “Convivencia: Religious Identities in the New World,” which set in motion an ongoing project dedicated to that very same topic.

ferent. It consciously grants equal dignity to everyone in a diverse society, not paying any attention to their various religious and ethnic backgrounds. *Convivencia*, accordingly, is not simply synonymous with “human communal living together” or with the concept of “tolerance.” Rather, it is a critically qualified, anti-hierarchical concept that renounces any form of superiority.

However, to think that it can be taken for granted that *convivencia* just happens is a grave mistake. It is actually very naïve, for in the everyday lives of people of different cultural, ethnic, and religious upbringings, potential sources of friction abound. These differences come to light most clearly in matters of lifestyle, like mores and customs, but also in matters such as observing different festivals and holidays tied to differences in hallowing time, and, above all, in the different languages spoken. Hence, the quality—meaning the credibility and reliability—of all discourse about *convivencia* has to be proven by its potential to resolve the conflicts abiding therein.

The Limits of Social Cohesion: Conflict and Mediation in Pluralist Societies is the telling title of a 1998 report to the Club of Rome by the Bertelsmann foundation containing the findings of sociological studies spanning several years and a total of eleven countries from around the globe (Berger 1998). Drawing practical conclusions on how to handle normative conflicts in various communities, the report arrived at a very interesting finding that also feeds into the immediate context here. The report states that there are actually only three kinds of possible negotiations or mediations in cases of normative conflicts (364-72). The first, called the “imperative” type, relies on the authority of those who are in control and have power. This type does not rule out suppression of the opinions of individuals, minority groups, or those who deviate from society at large. The second, called the “pragmatic” type, holds to the possibility of negotiation at round table talks and other structured dialogue between representative elites. Their distinctive strategy is to set aside consciously normative questions for the sake of a compromise—which however, has a high probability of *not* working when deeply rooted norms are affected. In such cases, only the “third, and most difficult type of mediation” will work, namely “dialogic mediation” because dialogic mediation addresses these “normative differences head-on” and seeks “not just a pragmatic but an ideational compromise” (367). According to Peter Berger, who headed the project, it is due to the lack of other expedients that one needs to turn to “methodological lessons ... from the experiences of interreligious dialogue” even if political conflicts on the international and global planes are at stake (368).

The dialogical type of negotiation is by far more difficult than the imperative or pragmatic one, if only for the amount of time it consumes. However, this is the only genuine type of negotiation, for it alone engages in “dealing with ev-

everyone's otherness without simply seeking the least common denominator" (370). The conceded difficulties, however, do not argue against dialogical negotiation; in fact they only prove the complexity of normative conflicts that, if not adequately addressed, have the potential to jeopardize every agreement accomplished. They also may spark "holy" wars. Striving and searching for appropriate structures of negotiating conflicts is therefore of preeminent practical and political significance. Yet, while advocating dialogue one might question the straightforward optimism of Peter Berger pleading for the lessons to be learned from interreligious dialogues because, when looking closely at various theories of such dialogue that have been proposed and discussed in the past, these theories are actually anything but homogeneous and are hardly—if at all—capable of addressing the basic issues at stake adequately, as will be shown in the following.

Understanding Religious Plurality

Any meaningful theological discussion of theories on interreligious dialogue has to keep at least the following three vital presuppositions in mind.

First, religions as expressions of lived relationships toward an ultimate—as I would like to define "religion"—cannot be compared with one another in a theologically meaningful sense, let alone be judged. Theology cannot so understand its nature and task, although, admittedly, quite often theologians perceive their work as advocating a clear superiority for their argument. In doing so, they, as well as scholars of comparative religion and philosophers, fail to grasp fully the implications of historical and terminological particularity that taints all reflection, however abstract it might appear.

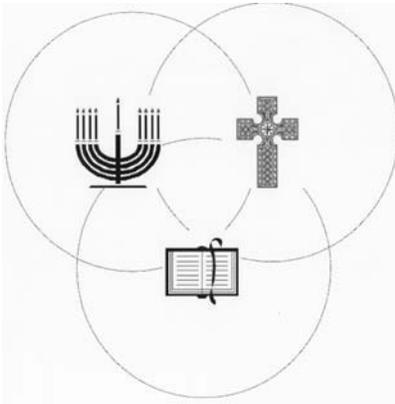
Second, it is even more problematic to compare isolated elements of different religions with one another bit by bit, as one might attempt to solve an algebraic equation. Religions cannot be set off against one another, either in whole or in part, since they mediate a more or less comprehensive worldview. *All* aspects of religious life and thought are integrally connected. They mutually interpret one another and bear the impress of a very specific understanding of world and life as they do of humanity, too. Their idiosyncrasies arise from the total context of their respective perception of world and life, the complexly intertwined religious, social, economic, historical, and political elements that over time have formed central and decisive paradigms.

Third, any serious examination of religious pluralism in our time must attempt to set one's own religious tradition in relation with those that other persons embody. This implies that getting involved in dialogue itself will elucidate one's own understanding of faith and life as it does with regard to the other partner in the dialogue when the process unfolds. For in such dialogue, all participants

are to articulate their explicit convictions consciously with prudence and an understanding of significant differences. The specific challenge of becoming engaged in any such dialogue lies in the willingness to tread lightly and carefully, neither absolutizing one's own claims to ultimate validity nor relativizing others' claims to it.

In the course of time certain heuristic concepts have evolved, among which three basic models can be discerned that I would like to call the set model, the cone model, and the plot model. Diagrams of these models can show both their advantages and limitations in facilitating interreligious dialogue.

The Set Model



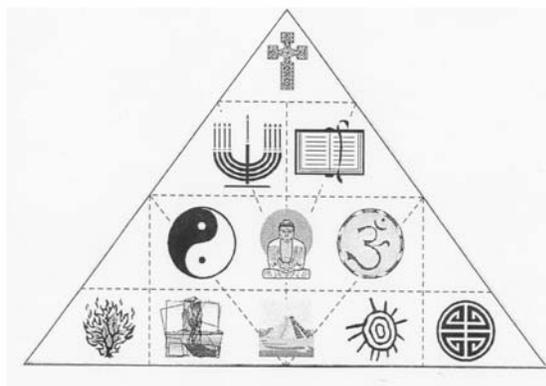
The ideal type of the set model is rendered here with only three identical intersecting circles, recalling Lessing's ring parable as expounded in his play "Nathan the Wise" (Lessing 1991). Different renderings might highlight the otherness of the respective religions through varied geometrical figures—triangles, quadrilaterals, or trapezoids. While this model grants all religions their independence, at the same time it illustrates not only distinguishable grades of overlap between them but also a shared central area. In the parlance

of the eighteenth century, this area could well delineate "natural religion" or even "true religion," but it can also be perceived as an underlying common denominator. According to this model, the dialogue would seek to identify the commonalities and would address these, for in emphasizing the common area one may find the possibility of genuine mutual understanding.

The obvious advantage of the set model is that it defies judgment. It envisions different religions as equal entities and illustrates both their factual juxtaposition and their mutual interference or interactions—whether intentional or not. However, it rests upon a hypothesis that does not do justice to the actual complexity of the religious situation. It also fails to recognize either history or the religions' own self-understanding. All "religions" here are marshaled and ordered by one quite definite concept of religion, which implies that such commonness exists. Thus, in effect, the set model effectively levels out the constitutive differences among the religions—a decided limitation.

The Cone Model

The cone model looks quite different. It both takes into account historical development and recognizes the mutual interdependence of the religions. It obviously represents a value-laden concept of religions, which can be regrouped or arranged according to one's own preferences, as is shown here.



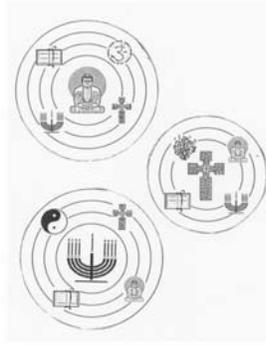
That one's own religion can be perceived as fulfillment, the crowning culmination and zenith of all other religions, expresses an unshaken self-confidence and certainty, indicating the still unbroken identity of the religious self-consciousness it mediates. Thus, it is not surprising that many of the medieval interreligious disputations were

committed to this model, for the conviction that basic religious assumptions were not to be scrutinized was still deeply entrenched in the minds of most people of that period.

Other religions are not regarded disparagingly in the cone model. They are seen as being no less—but also no more—than precursors to the definite religion in which they all are absorbed, elevated, and fulfilled. This recalls Schleiermacher's definition of Christianity as the "higher power" of all religion because in Christianity the infinite has become definitively manifest in the finite (see Schleiermacher 1994). Hegel's characterization of the Christian religion as "absolute religion"—namely Christianity as the religion of spirit, of truth, and of freedom—also comes to mind (Hegel 1984).

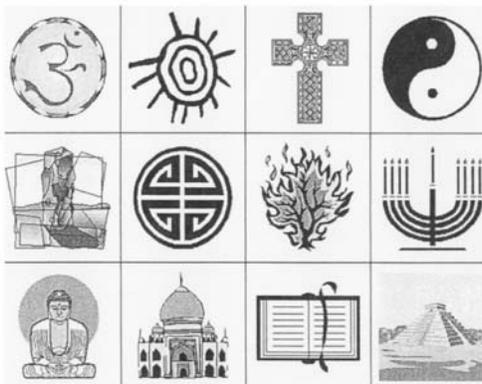
The strength of this model is that it honors the claims to the ultimate validity of a particular tradition. But this is purchased by more or less severely relativizing other such claims. While for this very reason this model is unacceptable to anyone advocating a pluralistic theory of religion, it attracts those who hold an exclusivist or inclusivist view. In fact, this model invites *both* an exclusive and an inclusive interpretation, depending on how one's own tradition is understood. Following a strictly exclusivist interpretation, the religious longings of all humans will find their true fulfillment only when they attain to the top of the cone, to the pinnacle of beliefs. In contrast, in the inclusivist interpretation, *all* "religions" have some part in salvation—in varying and subtle gradations, of course, but *real* participation. One might be reminded of the recognition of

“The Righteous among the Nations” by the People of Israel in Yad-vashem, Jerusalem, or Karl Rahner’s phrase “anonymous Christians,” by which he meant those adherents of non-Christian religions who are upright of heart and who are seeking God earnestly and without prejudice but not baptized (Rahner 1974: 390-98).



When viewed from above, the cone model reveals a variant depicted by concentric circles. Even though in this variant historical and genealogical aspects recede markedly, the central and dominant position of the respective religious tradition is maintained.

The Plot Model

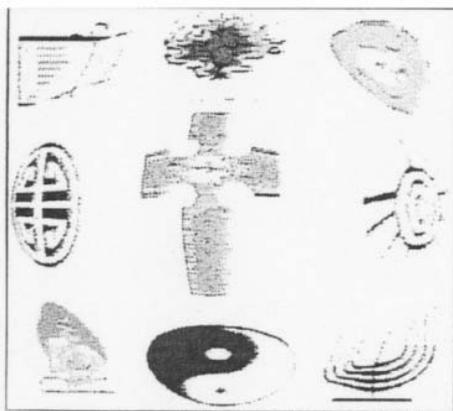


The third model, the plot model, which merely plots religions side by side equally, does not seem to be plagued by the limitations inherent in the models presented here so far. The plot model actually reflects the dominant theory of modern religious pluralism and has a great influence in the popular media and the political world, in the academy, the history of religions, and also in theological reflection.

In this model each “religion” holds an equivalent place, neither superior nor inferior to the others. Modern religions stand side by side with ancient ones, primal religions alongside scripture-based and highly sophisticated systems. Thus, the model displays the multicolored diversity of today’s religious situation like a kaleidoscope, matter-of-factly and dispassionately. It also discourages any exclusivist or inclusivist interpretation of religion, which is its indisputable virtue. Yet this achievement is purchased only by denying any claim to ultimate validity and by this refusal loses any recognition of the ongoing dynamic interaction of religions based on those claims. This is a completely a-religious model of religion. Intentionally ignoring religious dimensions, it forces

socio-religious phenomena into an ideological Procrustean bed. It visualizes a static co-existence of different cultural traditions and, in so doing, decisively distorts how the problem is posed. Consequently, this model cannot contribute meaningfully to solving the actual problems encountered when living in a religiously diverse environment.

If one really wants to depict faithfully—at least to some extent—how other religions are perceived from a decidedly religious perspective, the diagram would look somewhat like the following.



From the perspective of a particular religious tradition, the perception of other religions inevitably suffers distortions. While not ignoring the other religions, they are seen only peripherally and in less sharp focus. This being the case, the task of interreligious dialogue would certainly be to address the obvious aberrations in order to correct them by considering the significant differences in the historical as well as the religious self-understanding of the others. But even if this process were to succeed, one

would end up again with the plot model, albeit in enriched detail. However, something else interferes here with the theory, namely the perception of one's own religious tradition, which actually is never as clear and consistent as the diagram suggests. The contours of one's own religious tradition emerge properly defined only at certain points and hardly ever with respect to the entire tradition as such. How much more problematic, then, is one's relation with other religions! By and large, everything remains remarkably hazy and diffuse.

Convivencia and Interreligious Dialogue

Such a somewhat realistic appraisal of religious perceptions visualizes the extreme difficulties that have to be overcome in order to attain a truly mutual understanding of people from different cultural-religious backgrounds and to safeguard their peaceful coexistence. The complexity of the task is obvious. How could even the most sincere dialogue sufficiently compensate for all the distortions? If the dynamic of each of the different religions were to be taken seriously into account—their continual change and deviations, as well as the interdependence and overlapping of these dynamics in a globalized world—

then it would become fully evident why any systematization of such an encounter is doomed to fail. All efforts toward a handy theory of interreligious dialogue and all attempts to construct neat models, have to be regarded as inadequate, even as failures. This suggests that they should be dispensed with altogether, because they lead to misconceptions and ignore that it is only in actually lived encounter that one comes to know others. In becoming engaged together in dialogue one might finally discover and encounter the totally Other in an entirely new way than never before.

An in-depth examination of interreligious dialogue, therefore, involves systematically deconstructing all preconceived models of dialogue. In this way—and *only* in this way—will one succeed in clearing the way to genuine encounter. Deconstruction for the sake of dialogue has to be the watchword! While this may seem too neatly stated, it is decisive, because the success of the entire venture depends critically upon it. A dialogue in which one is eager to uphold theories or models and looks for their reconfirmation is doomed to founder from the outset because it has a hidden agenda. The requisite openness and matter-of-fact quality of genuine dialogue depends on dispensing with the security of given concepts and models in dialogue, thereby taking a true risk, for the outcome can never be guaranteed nor is it certain. With eyes wide open, all participants in the dialogue set out on a path knowing only the general direction but neither the exact route nor the definite destination. But is such journeying not the fate of every genuine inquiry?

From this insight, finally, it follows that a genuinely religious position that is also theologically responsible—as distinct from a merely a-religious theoretical approach to religion—cannot content itself with just noticing and documenting the presence of different religions since to a religiously articulate mind religious plurality means contesting lived relationships towards the Ultimate. Consequently, since genuinely religious people are troubled by religious plurality, they have to engage in dialogue in the search for that which truly sustains it all. As persons who are thus existentially troubled, these people are on the move because to them the experience of religious plurality has done nothing less than sett the entire world tottering. Driven by the quest for a truly reliable grounding, dialogue has become their destiny.⁶

⁶ Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) gave his autobiography the telling title: *The Story of my Experiments with Truth* (1st ed. 1957). The British Anglican bishop Kenneth Craig, writing about his experience with Christian-Muslim dialogue in the Middle East, collected the life stories of peoples engaged in interfaith dialogue under a title that suggested that he and the others were *Troubled by Truth* (1994) —and he spoke as one who had spent his entire life as a Christian in these areas. Jean Faure, a French Christian missionary who was

To endure this kind of innermost existential tension will only be possible on the strength of an unmediated certainty in the self-disclosing nature of the truth that is in the self-disclosure and self-revelation of the living God or the Ultimate, respectively. This certainty has its own logic: since the revelation of God or of the Ultimate as the truth has been troubled and shaken by the experience of a religiously diverse situation, only God as the Ultimate can reaffirm the truth as such.

All discourse and thinking about truth, the Ultimate, and about God is and will always remain human reflection; therefore, any such discourse is and remains forever limited, insufficient, contingent, and ultimately inadequate with respect to what is expressed in words, concepts, and deeds. Even though one can nevertheless invoke the ineffable by appropriate life, gesture and speech and keep its very character sufficiently perceptible in interpersonal communication. This claim is, of course, meaningful only provided that truth can and will reveal itself anew in a fresh way, again and again, continually to be recognized as such. If the truth is thereby really revitalized, the tangible experience of religious plurality today would not actually question the truly Ultimate. Rather, religious plurality questions only whether the continuum of speech about religion has ever adequately articulated the Ultimate. Thus the present religious situation, to an extent unknown before and in ways unparalleled in their radical nature, only provokes the quest for ways to communicate more adequately about that which really makes sense—ultimately; it does not question the Ultimate as such.

Today, most people live in religious illiteracy and inarticulateness, especially in the Western world. They greet the pluralists' complete dismissal of the essential question: "What is truth?" as the proper solution of the issue of religious plurality, thereby implicitly advocating relativism. However, such dismissal is precisely *not* a solution. It is only a suspension of the vital normative question that, if unresolved, fosters religious motivations to break up *convivenzia* and finally go to war for the declared sake of defending "the truth." But again, the only way to prevent this from happening is by being-in-dialogue-together on the subject. If it should happen in the course of dialogue that one recognizes delusions and deceptions as such—as one certainly will—then one must consequently abandon them and has to part with familiar images, cherished and longstanding, should any of these prove no longer sufficiently plausible. Even though painful, this should not be regarded as loss. Instead, it is an inestimable gain, for just so one becomes aware of the critical difference be-

passionately engaged in lifelong dialogue with Muslims in Togo, summed up this engagement with an allusion to Anselm: "*inter-fides quaerens intellectum*—crushed between different faiths, the faith searches for understanding" (Schoen 1984: 10).

tween the truly Ultimate and the merely preliminary penultimate. Such clarity dismisses systems and opens one up to a true knowledge of the Ultimate as of God as truth. If it holds true that dialogue means encounter, then interreligious dialogue implies—at least potentially—a genuine encounter with the Ultimate, with God as the truth, and this makes engaging in it so very exciting and promising while at the very same time it enables people to appreciate truly the manifold differences in reconciled diversity without ever jeopardizing their peaceful *convivencia*.

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