The Dialogical Imperative

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A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter

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Introduction

Dialogue is an issue like motherhood: almost everyone is in favor of it. It is a "good thing." It is so self-evidently valid that many of us feel that we need not think about it. We tip our hats to the concept, and go about our business without a second thought.

Like many motherhood issues, dialogue is honored in our rhetoric. In our practice, however, it is questionable that we consider dialogue to be of high priority. This is particularly true of interfaith dialogue. We carry on in our religious institutions as if monologue were our chief calling. We have a message to broadcast to the world. It might be nice to have the luxury of conversations with people of other religious traditions, but we really do not have the time. The really important thing is to set about getting our message out. Interfaith dialogue is a nice idea that we might just get around to some day!

The frustration of getting churches to consider the importance of interfaith dialogue is evident in writers like Stanley Samartha and John Cobb. The agenda of mainline Christian churches in recent years has been focused on peace and justice issues, issues that go to the root of the human situation, issues that involve the very survival of human life on this planet. In the face of the urgency of the ecumenical agenda, churches regard having friendly conversations with Hindus or Muslims or Buddhists as something that will just have to wait.

The current ecumenical agenda has been influenced by the emergence in the last few decades of what has come to be called "contextual theology." This movement has recognized that the words we use to speak about God, about human nature and destiny, take on a meaning in relation to the particular context in which they are spoken. "God loves every person" has a different meaning if spoken in an affluent North American congregation than when spoken in the slums of Calcutta. Theologians have responded to this insight by attempting to integrate social analysis into their theological reflection. The differences between rich and poor, between powerful and powerless, have become important considerations in understanding how, by word and deed, the Word of God needs to be spoken today.

Contextual theology has enabled the churches to become more and more sensitive to the relevance of social and economic disparity to the way in which they understand mission. However, the economic diversity that social analysis can reveal is not the only diversity that pervades our social context. We live in a world of religious diversity as well. If, as a Christian, I need to respond in faith

and in practice to the presence of my neighbors, then I need to respond not only to their poverty but also to their Buddhism, or Hinduism, or whatever tradition these people represent. The problem is not with the idea of a contextual theology. The problem is that our contextual analysis has not gone far enough.

One of the factors in our relative disinterest in interfaith dialogue is, I believe, a certain capitulation by mainline Christians to secularist views of religion. Secularism assigns religion to the private realm. Public life attempts to isolate religion, defining it as a matter of private preference, as relevant to public life as the brand of deodorant you happen to prefer.

That view of religion as a matter of private preference has been reflected in the way that the churches have tended to identify the crucial questions that they are called to address in the world. But, of course, the reality is not quite that neat. Religious issues keep intruding where they are not supposed to be. A Sikh wants to wear a turban at a construction site. Catholics want public funding for their school system. Fundamentalist Islam complicates the already complicated politics of the Middle East.

This book is written from two major concerns. The first concern is that we need to pay more attention to the fact that Christians today are called to practice their faith in a world that is marked by religious diversity. The second concern is my belief that in paying attention to what is involved in interfaith dialogue, we might learn something new about what mission means in the world today.

The concern for doing theology in conscious dialogue with other religious traditions has been represented recently by a small but growing group of theologians. These include John Hick, John Cobb, Hans Küng, Stanley Samartha, Langdon Gilkey—to name a few of the more prominent representatives of this concern.

The development of a theology of religions involves attempts to recover what has been until now an invisible history. The Christian story as most of us learned it made little reference to the fact that Christian history is only a part of a world history that includes other religious traditions. There is indeed a history of Christian relationships with other faith traditions. That history, however, is largely unknown.

In studying the growing literature on interfaith relationships, I became concerned that the story was being told too simply. One is given the impression that the history of Christian interfaith relations is a simple matter of distinguishing between the "good guys" and the "bad guys." The "good guys" are those who accept people of other traditions as people of faith. The "bad guys" are those who think that people who are outside the Christian Church are ignorant of the truth.

History is not that simple. Instead of approaching the problem as one of the history of ideas, I propose that we look at the problem as one in the sociology of knowledge. What kind of theology would we expect from a community that is related in a specific way to another community of a different religious tradition? From this analysis, which is found in the first four chapters of this

book, I attempt to make two main points. First, there are distinct differences between various types of Christian "exclusivism." To lump these together under the one label is not very helpful to our understanding of what interfaith relationship involves. Second, it is very dubious to assume that the bad record of Christians in relating to other religious traditions is the fault of certain Christian ideas. It is equally as likely that the bad ideas are projections of bad relationships. In short, to understand the current situation of Christianity to other faith traditions requires that we engage in ideological analysis. The problem is not exclusively, nor indeed primarily, one that can be dealt with by the criticism of traditional ideas.

I approach the subject of interfaith dialogue as one who was trained upon the borderline between philosophy of religion and systematic theology. Consequently, readers who may expect a book to be one or the other may have some difficulty in following my argument. It may seem from time to time that I jump from one to the other in mid-sentence. The explanation is that I do not see questions of conceptual clarification as separate from questions of theological substance. In this sense, the book is itself a dialogue between a philosopher who is concerned with conceptual clarity and a church theologian who is concerned with the interpretation of the Word of God in a contemporary Christian community. Both parties to that dialogue happen to be me. Three concerns—philosophical clarity, theological fidelity, and practical consequences—are interwoven as themes throughout the book.

I need to say a word about my own theological and philosophical education. Two of my philosophical and theological mentors are mentioned prominently in this work. These are Martin Buber and Karl Barth. Others are mentioned in passing: Paul Tillich and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Still others are barely mentioned at all but are very much present in their influence on the perspective that I bring to the task. The most important of these hidden mentors are Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Sören Kierkegaard.

The inclusion of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard on this list is much more significant than might appear from the number of times their names appear in the text. Both Kierkegaard and the later Wittgenstein were philosophers of discontinuity. Their influence will be evident in my resistance to what I call a theology of partnership, the idea that there are truths that are common to all religions and that can, therefore, form the basis for interreligious dialogue. I am not philosophically inclined to recognize similarity as sameness when the contexts of similarities are as very different as they are across interfaith boundaries. The philosophical tradition that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein represent may help some to understand an aspect of the book which might otherwise appear to be sheer perversity. I may indeed be perverse. My training, however, predisposes me to look for significance in differences.

It is important to mention my philosophical and theological lineage in order to put into perspective the approach I have taken in this work to the theology of Karl Barth. I regard Barth as one of my mentors. I have often worked out my own theological position in dialogue with relevant sections of the *Church*

Dogmatics. I do not consider myself a "Barthian" except in this sense.

What I have done here could be interpreted as an attempt to do what seems to be impossible: to articulate a Barthian theology of interfaith dialogue. That would be misleading. What I am concerned about is that the question posed by Barth about religion not be begged in a rush to embrace other religious traditions. I am in favor of the embrace. I am not in favor of begging questions.

It needs to be made clear that I am not claiming that Barth was "really" in favor of interfaith dialogue. That would be going too far. I am claiming that Barth's theology never addressed the question of interfaith dialogue and that it is not closed to it in principle. This interpretation goes against the prevailing view of Barth among those who are writing on interfaith concerns. The prevailing view holds that Barth investigated the area of interfaith relationships and erected an unambiguous "No Trespassing" sign upon it. My claim is that the whole area was one that Barth did not seriously investigate at all. To paint Barth as a xenophobe in relation to other religious traditions has become the excuse for an avoidance of the primary question that Barth poses: Are we justified by our religiosity? Barth was not an Arminian. He did not believe, as much evangelical thought believes, that we are saved by our acceptance of Christ. To ascribe to him an Arminianism that underlies this type of Christian triumphalism is a fundamental misunderstanding of his contribution to contemporary theological thought.

Having said that, I want to disavow the label "Barthian" for what I have written here. A strict Barthian would have difficulty with the importance that I give to philosophical concepts of dialogue in Plato and Buber. I attempt to show how a theology of dialogue is possible from the perspective of a protestant emphasis on the priority of revelation. I do not attempt to make that emphasis normative. My intention is quite the reverse. Some commentators suggest that a normative theology of interfaith dialogue would disqualify a Protestant emphasis from the very beginning. Against that, I want to urge that any adequate theology of dialogue must be available, in principle at least, to those of any theological conviction. An invitation to a dialogue that demands conversion to anything but dialogue itself, one suspects, must be an invitation to monologue in disguise.