

# Interreligious Dialogue Beyond Conflicts

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We will proceed in three steps:

1. Where we are: realization, relation, reflection
2. Where we want to go: hopes, levels, themes
3. What it costs: clarity, justice, success

Each step will revisit the title “Interreligious dialogue beyond conflicts” and try to uncover a new dimension of it. What we might discover is this:

- a) Dialogue is about getting us beyond conflicts.
- b) Dialogue does not mean solving all conflicts.
- c) Dialogue is more than just conflict resolution.

Before this, however, we will have to make some preliminary remarks on interreligious dialogue.

## 1. UNDERSTANDING DIALOGUE

### **Philology**

The word “dialogue” is a rather recent acquisition to Church vocabulary. Ecclesial texts first mention “dialogue” during the Second Vatican Council; but before it appears in one of its documents, we find it in a letter: the newly elected Paul VI mentions “dialogue” in his first encyclical in 1964, *Ecclesiam Suam*. The pontiff characterizes the Church of today in a triple way: It has to be the Church of deeper self-knowledge, renewal, and dialogue. Inspired by God’s dialogue with creation, the pope calls the Church to dialogue on all levels.

Church-world dialogue, interreligious dialogue, ecumenical dialogue, and intra-Church dialogue were explicitly mentioned. Although

Paul VI was clearly influenced by the French philosophers and their attitude of *dialogue*, the Latin version of the letter did not use the word “*dialogus*” but “*colloquium*”. This sounds as if the openness and honesty you need in order to enter into a real “dialogue” had ceded to a settled, but uncommitted talk. The choice of phrasing may, however, have had mere idiomatic reasons<sup>1</sup>.

*Gaudium et Spes* will, a year later, be marked by the attitude of “dialogue” as its leitmotif; and it will use even in Latin “*dialogus*” without inhibition, interchanging it with “*colloquium*.” It even quotes Paul’s inaugural encyclical, as if “*dialogus*” was found there<sup>2</sup>.

## Terminology

Can we define what dialogue is? We should be careful. Defining our terms at the beginning is scholastic methodology. Rather than *terminological consistence* – a mathematical virtue – we should strive for the Biblical attitude of *creative faithfulness*, also in words. Faithfulness does precisely not say that we know already what the words we use mean, and we’ll stick to that. In the history of salvation there is promise in the words used, and therefore risk; think of “Messiah” or “Lord”<sup>3</sup>. Still, a preliminary designation of “dialogue” can help. *Dialogue is what happens if I have a view and become interested in someone who sees it differently.*

## Epistemology

This designation leads to seven characteristics of a truly dialogical attitude.

1. My starting point is not a “position” in the sense that I have *decided* to believe this or that; speaking of a “view”, rather than a position, I claim to have reality contact;

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<sup>1</sup> For Thomas Aquinas *dialogus/dyalogus* is the designation of a genre of literary works, especially Pope Gregory’ whereas for “conversation” he uses *colloquium*. *Coloquio* is also Ignatius of Loyola’s word for the exercitant’s encounter with Mary, Jesus and the Father toward the end of meditation or contemplation (*Spiritual Exercises*, § 45).

<sup>2</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, § 40, note 81.

<sup>3</sup> Peter, as opposed to Jesus, seems to start with a (“scholastically”) defined concept of “Messiah” and needs to see that it is not his definition but the life of Jesus that provides the “true” meaning of the word. *Κύριος/kurios* turns out to be a rendering of “Rabbi” (teacher), of “Lord” (for the Roman emperor), and of “Adonay” (JHWH).

2. But, I am also aware of the fact that what I claim is *only* a view of things; I accept the difference between view and reality; and the possibility of other views;
3. And now in fact, I come to see that there is really someone with another view;
4. I am not necessarily giving up my view, nor am I immediately reaffirming it, trying to convince the other;
5. I am, rather, interested in the fact that someone can have a different interpretation, possibly a different “view”, that is – experience, rather than illusion (*Wahn*);
6. I become interested in the person who holds it;
7. And I wonder whether his view is correct, or mine, or both; or none of them.

This brief epistemological reflection has shown us dialogue is not a timid self-annihilation, an expression of pathological insecurity, but a healthy minded realism, that includes, even when it comes to religion, the bold claim that in your belief you are in reality contact, and precisely therefore you can be wrong or incomplete with your view. It is not politeness that inclines you to changing your ideas; you change them if you have reached a new perception of reality.

## Chronology

A contextualization of Catholic-Muslim relation should provide two frameworks. The *most recent events* should be briefly called to mind; then, in a more detailed and reflective manner, the development of Church attitudes in the last 50 years should be reviewed.

**November 2004.** The Aal al-Bayt Institute, supported by the Jordan Hashimite Royal family, launches two important documents, the so-called *Amman Message*<sup>4</sup>, an attempt at creating an intra-Muslim dialogue and at reminding Muslims and non-Muslims of the non violent mission Islam has. Simultaneously, the *Amman Interfaith Message* is pronounced. In it, King Abdullah calls for benevolence and dialogue between Judaism, Islam and Christianity and quotes the Biblical commandment of love of God and love of one’s neighbor.

**Christmas 2005.** Pope Benedict XVI publishes his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.ammanmessage.com](http://www.ammanmessage.com)

**March 2006.** Pope Benedict puts his Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (PCID) under the direction of the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, Cardinal Paul Poupard, sending PCID's former director, Mons. Michael Fitzgerald, as nuncio to Cairo.

**September 12, 2006.** Pope Benedict delivers his Regensburg Lecture. Pointing out the centrality of *logos* (reason) for Christianity he contrasts this with Islam's violent and inhuman character. In quoting a statement by Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1391) and even in expressing reservation towards the wording, the pope's words were taken to be an insult to Islam.

**October 12, 2006.** 38 Muslims write an open letter to the Pope, expressing their dissent with the contents and tonality of the Regensburg lecture, asking for a new phase of dialogue.

**November 28, 2006.** Benedict XVI, in his speech in the Religious Directorate of Turkey, in Ankara quotes, approvingly, Pope Gregory VII's words to a Muslim leader in 1054: "We believe in one God, albeit in a different manner"<sup>5</sup>.

**October 13, 2007.** The *Common Word* signed by 138 Muslim is sent to the Pope and church leaders of the world.

**November 2008.** Taking up this initiative, the first seminar in the newly founded Catholic-Muslim Forum is held in Rome. Its title is: Love of God, love of neighbor: theological and spiritual foundations; human dignity and mutual respect.

**November 2011** a second seminar in the Catholic-Muslim Forum is being planned. Possibly the subject will be: Reason, Faith, Human person.

Let us now review the last 50 years of interreligious attitudes in the Catholic Church. We can do so by marking out three phases, each one represented by a Pope. Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. A common view is that after years of dialogue, with Benedict we are back to dogmatics. Perhaps, however, a different reading is more accurate; an interpretation that sees Benedict's words, decisions and moves to be a coherent development of what has gone before. Three concepts will be introduced to characterize the three pontificates in terms of interreligious policy: realization, relation, and reflection.

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<sup>5</sup> *Patrologia Latina*, volume 148, column 451; [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedictxvi/speeches/2006/november/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20061128\\_pres-religious-affairs\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedictxvi/speeches/2006/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20061128_pres-religious-affairs_en.html)

## 2. WHERE WE ARE: REALIZATION, RELATION, REFLECTION

### Paul VI: Realization

Throughout Church history, there have been interesting interreligious encounters. Christian theologians have been debating with Muslims since the beginning of Islam<sup>6</sup>. The underlying question, however, was either, how to refute Muslim belief, or how to establish its similarity with Christianity. Comparisons occurred, but difference had not been perceived as theologically relevant. The Council realized that discussing a non-Christian belief is productive for Christian theology. Three causes for this paradigm shift can be named: The dialogical attitude of Paul VI, the post-Vatican II conciliar spirit, and the urge many Catholics felt to return to the arena of people's existential questions, to make the Church again a factor in the shaping of human conscience, politics and society.

It was not, however, mere power calculation; it was, rather, the intuition that we have to listen to others in order to be truthful. The theological change was, then, that other religious views were discovered to be theologically valuable; that Catholic thought could learn from other Christian traditions, as it had always learned from philosophical innovations; and that it could be newly inspired by listening to the witness of Israel. From there, arose the intuition that Christian theology might also have a theological interest in other religions, especially in Islam.

In classical theological language, different sources of authoritative knowledge were listed as *loci* of theology<sup>7</sup>. At least in a wider sense, as a point of view for new discovery, we could say, interreligious encounter has come to be realized as a new *locus* of theology.

### John Paul II: Relation

The genius of John Paul II manifested itself in his personal charism, the charm. He had suffered from different totalitarian regimes, Nazi Germany to begin with. His character was extrovert and creative, so

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. FELIX KÖRNER, *Kirche im Angesicht des Islam. Theologies des interreligiösen Zeugnisses*, Stuttgart 2008, chapter 3, and chapter 6, § A. And: "Bibliographie du dialogue islamo-chrétien", in: *Islamochristiana* 1 (1975), pp. 125-181; 2 (1976), pp. 187-249; 3 (1977), pp. 255-256; 4 (1978), pp. 245-267; 5 (1979), pp. 299-317; 6 (1980), pp. 259-299; cf. also MICHAEL PENN, "Syriac Sources for the Study of Early Christian-Muslim Relations", in: *Islamochristiana* 29 (2003), pp. 39-78.

<sup>7</sup> MELCHIOR CANO, *De Locis theologicis* (Salamanca, 1562) lists ten: Scripture, oral tradition, the Catholic Church, the councils, the Roman Church, the Fathers, scholastic theologians, natural reason, philosophers, and history.

he always tried to bridge gaps and tensions. There was an intuitive – and in Poland not very common – liking for the Jews, a readiness to adopt thought from a culture other of his generation might have seen as mere enemy: his PhD was on Max Scheler! He also seemed to like theists: an obvious reaction to the atheisms he had experienced. A man of great gesture and a father figure, he became popular also in majority Muslim countries; more popular, one might say, than in the critical Occident. Young Muslims felt encouraged by him. His aura and his readiness to reconcile came across credibly; he successfully sowed enthusiasm. His message and attitude was, on many levels, inclusivist. For the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, redesigned during his pontificate out of Paul VI's *Secretariat for Non-Christians*, the "JP II" years very active and productive.

### **Benedict XVI: Reflection**

In an attempt at reforming the Pontifical curia, Benedict subordinated his Council for Interreligious Dialogue to the Council for Culture. His Regensburg lecture (September 12, 2006) seemed to prove right what some had been predicting about the "German Shepherd": the end of successful, diplomatic interreligious bridge building – clear borders – truth, rather than love – uncompromising, not understanding.

We need to see, however, that Benedict was in fact going the next necessary step. The preparatory work done by his predecessors called for a new phase; and the step he is taking is not moving from friendship to conflict. He rather sees the opening of gates John Paul had achieved as an opportunity to now do something with the open gates. Benedict's pontificate is one of theology, of intellectual seriousness, and reflection. The Regensburg lecture must be understood in this context. Benedict apparently wanted provoke to new thought his academic colleagues, as he had often done with Lutheran fellow theologians. He was himself surprised and embarrassed to see that what he had provoked was, at first, not new thinking, but offense and violence.

In autumn 2008, however, a constructive Muslim suggestion was taken up in the Vatican, and now leaders and scholars of Catholic and Islamic background came together, precisely to reflect<sup>8</sup>. Since then, he has several times formulated that interreligious encounter is valuable to him. Especially elucidating is Benedict's London statement of September 17, 2010. He described interreligious relationship as a double

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<sup>8</sup> October 12, 2006: Open letter of 38 Muslims to the Pope; October 13, 2007: *Common Word* of 138 Muslims to Leaders of the churches; November 4-6, 2008: First Catholic-Muslim Forum.

movement: side by side and face to face<sup>9</sup>. That is to say, together with believers of other religions I can testify to those parts of my society that do not dare to ask the ultimate questions; and facing my fellow believers, I can share the richness of my own heritage. Benedict does, however, not speak of “interreligious dialogue”, we sometimes hear<sup>10</sup>. He really wrote once that, strictly speaking, interreligious dialogue is impossible<sup>11</sup>. Why?

### 3. WHERE WE WANT TO GO: HOPES, LEVELS, THEMES

There is a fundamental difference between ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. All Christians want to witness the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as saving the world. The separation of Christianity is perceived differently by various Christians; but in the Spirit of Christ’s prayer, the Catholic Church feels the urge to promote dialogue with all Christians “*ut unum sint*”<sup>12</sup> as a visible unification of all Christians into the one, truly “catholic”, Church.

Such a catholic unity includes respect for the varieties of spiritualities, traditions, languages and cultures within Christianity. The Catholic intuition is that only such a unified – though not uniform – witness is credible. So we have a clear aim for ecumenical dialogue, and we have come to learn a lot in it<sup>13</sup>. How far is interreligious dialogue different from that? It is the relation we have with human beings who do not witness the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as saving the world<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. FELIX KÖRNER, “Eine neue Epoche. Die interreligiösen Beziehungen sind unter Benedikt XVI. Theologischer geworden”, in: *Herder Korrespondenz Spezial* 2-2010, Konflikt und Kooperation. Können die Religionen zusammenfinden?, pp. 21-24. Articles by the author quoted in this paper are accessible online: <http://www.sankt-georgen.de/lehrende/koerner.html>

<sup>10</sup> An explicit approval of interreligious dialogue is in Benedict’s 2010 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, § 117.

<sup>11</sup> In a letter to Marcello Pera which was published as preface to Pera’s book *Perché dobbiamo dirci Cristiani. Il liberalismo, l’Europa, l’etica*, Milano 2008. But Benedict was here expressing his agreement with Pera’s view that interreligious dialogue as public confrontation does not necessarily lead to finding the truth. Cf. FELIX KÖRNER, “Dialogunmöglich? Leitlinien für ein Glaubensgespräch mit Muslimen”, in: *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 2/2009, pp. 48-50.

<sup>12</sup> “That they may be one”. John 17:21.

<sup>13</sup> WALTER CARDINAL KASPER, *Harvesting the Fruits. Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue*, London 2009.

<sup>14</sup> This seems a rather loose definition, speaking so generally of “relation”; but in fact official Church documents want to tag as interreligious dialogue even the most casual day-to-day encounter between a Christian and a non-Christian. See below, § 2.b(i).

Since with other Christians we (at least think we) are starting from the same impulse of desired Church unity, we can speak of the great dialogical aim of Christians uniting. With other religions, matters are different. We cannot have a common fundamental aim, because other religions have other basic purposes than the Church. It is the sacrament of Christ<sup>15</sup>, or, in the words of the oldest document of the New Testament, what we want is “your sanctification” (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

In order to show respect for this distinction of religious aims, some theologians, like Pope Benedict, hesitate to speak of interreligious dialogue altogether. We cannot agree in the fundamental articles of faith with non-Christians. There is, however, a Pontifical Council which bears that name, and Benedict himself praised interreligious dialogue explicitly in 2009<sup>16</sup>. Only the difference needs to be kept in mind that interreligious dialogue is not working for theological agreement with other religions.

What, then, can be our aims in interreligious dialogue? In a dialogue where our starting points are so fundamentally different, it is more adequate not to speak of aims. Such a dialogue cannot not be designed tactically. Human freedom makes a truly dialogical process unpredictable; aims may, here, change on the way. We should, therefore, rather speak of our motivations and of our hopes.

## Hopes

Our hopes in interreligious dialogue are five. Each can all be termed “understanding”, but each time in a different sense.

1. We need to find agreement (“come to an understanding”) in practical questions that have to do with religious observance. For example in Germany, Muslims can bury their dead in particular areas now without the coffin, which was originally mandatory to protect ground-water.
2. In dialogue we come to understand why others see things the way they do. For example, they can understand the plain linen that is covering the corpse as a reminder of the imminence of the bodily resurrection; a similar clothing is worn by men during the pilgrimage to Mecca, thus anticipating death and final judgment.
3. In coming to discover the views of others, many Christians believe they come to understand their own religious intuitions, beliefs and practices better. For example, Muslims often show themselves

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<sup>15</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, § 1.

<sup>16</sup> Address at the Hussein bin Talal Mosque, Amman, Jordan, 9 May 2009.



surprised at the existence of four canonical gospels; they think the Gospel is the text entrusted to the “prophet” Jesus. In discussing this view, Christians can grasp the logics of “witnessing”. God’s saving action is not only the message, but the life, death and resurrection of Christ. These are events of God’s salvation; they are controversial, and thus require testimony.

4. There is another hope in interreligious dialogue: the hope that my counterpart may understand Christ to be Savior of the whole world; the hope that my partner in dialogue may accept Christianity and ask for baptism. It is by no means embarrassing to mention this as a hope. It cannot be a strategic aim; but it should not be kept hidden, either. If dialogue is: becoming more interested in the other’s view, and if I have discovered Christ to be the Savior, I will also be seen as wanting to share this. This is not problematic, as long as three conditions are fulfilled:
  - a) you are not ashamed about your hope, but open;
  - b) you are not using any tricks or pressure;
  - c) you are not offended or less interested in the other, if one does not fulfill that hope.
5. In the fifth hope, with even with a person or a group that does not want to be baptized, I have a lot of themes for dialogue. I am interested in why they do not accept; and if my interest in their views is sincere, I might also feel tempted to change my own view and start seeing things the way my partner in dialogue does. In any case, I remain interested in the relationship with others in order to dialogue on other themes. The purpose of the Church to sanctify the world. To evangelize, as the post-conciliar word goes, is not restricted to baptizing people. Evangelization means to transform the face of the world in the sense of the Gospel. Those who do not want to become Christians can still be partners in the Church’s project to shape our societies of today. Priorities, objectives, visions for humanity, economic, cultural, social, humanitarian methods can still be shared. That is why the Church formulates and presents its Social Teaching. Non-Christians are often inspired by it, and have proven exemplary in its implementation.

## Levels

Ecclesial documents have, since *Dialogue and Mission* (1984; §§ 28-35) and *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991; § 42), often repeated a four level scheme of interreligious dialogue. Being “levels”, they are aspects of interreligious encounter as a whole, rather than separating different sorts of activities, but they claim to be a complete description; and more than only recounting what is happening – and providing a

language of categories for it – the list is also setting its accents: it is encouraging certain types of encounter by mentioning them. I will argue, however, that one important level has been overlooked.

- (i) *Everyday life is already mentioned as a level of dialogue*, though there may not be much “-logue”, much speaking, going on. But using the same minibus, working for the same company, attending the same school is highlighted as a moment of dialogue; highlighted, that is, as an occasion to show humanity, even respect and interest.
- (ii) *Common projects, humanitarian activity is the second level*. The experience of the Jesuit Refugee Service, for example, is that its work for a displaced people is more convincing, easily accepted, influential as an impulse for reconciliation, if members of different religions carry responsibility for the service together.
- (iii) *Mystical experience is pointed out as a third level*. Spiritual exchange beyond the borders of a religion is in fact daring and elucidating. Conspicuous events like the Assisi prayer event come to mind; there is an organization of inter-monastic dialogue crossing religious boundaries.
- (iv) *The last level mentioned in the documents is expert encounters*. Exchange between, say, Muslims and Christian thinkers has a long story both in is called today the Middle East and in places like Andalusia. Since 1986, professors from Ankara’s Muslim Divinity Faculty and the Gregorian, Rome, are paying exchange visits to each other; and high ranking delegations from the Catholic and Islamic world are meeting within processes such as “Catholic-Muslim Forum”. Today, many faculties, associations, even scholarly publications like *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, are opening spaces for academic encounter.
- (v) But as mentioned above, one might argue that one level is missing. Perhaps it has even been left out intentionally, because such dialogue can be embarrassing, create trouble. Those who live among Muslims will share this experience. As a lay person as well as a non-academic, you are easily being involved in discussions with Muslims. A typical question would be why Christians do not accept Muhammad as prophet although he was foretold by Jesus and although Muslims accept Jesus as prophet. This is likely to be the most common form of dialogue. Mentioning it, means also preparing Christians for such encounters. Rather than making them learn by heart quick and clever answers, we have to set our minds to a particular dynamic: witnessing to our faith, but not in front of an unbeliever but in conversation with somebody who believes, but believes something different.

## Themes

If we bring together the various ends we have unraveled so far, i.e., space for reflection, hope of understanding, lay discussion, we can also see what needs to be asked now: What progress has been achieved through interreligious dialogue? What can be done in the future?

*Jewish-Christian* dialogue has been quite successful in the last decades. Three theological steps ahead should be pointed out:

### A) *Covenant not revoked*

In the face of theologies of election that would like to see the Church substituting Israel, Pope John Paul II pointed out in 1980 in Mainz, Germany, that Israel *is* God's people of the covenant He has never revoked. Benedict is faithful to this<sup>17</sup>. Contemporary theology does not claim several covenants but sees that God's one covenant, as witnessed in the Bible, consists of a series of covenantal acts<sup>18</sup>.

### B) *Torah not abolished*

In 1966, Klaus Berger, a now famous New Testament scholar, tried to defend in his doctoral thesis that Jesus' interpretation of the Jewish Law was not abolishing it. Berger's view was declared heretic then. Times have changed. By now, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is able to declare, that Jesus was not breaking with the Torah: "The Law of the Gospel fulfills the commandments of the Law. The Sermon on the Mount, far from abolishing or Devaluing the moral prescriptions of the Old Law, releases their hidden potential and has new demands arise from them: it reveals their entire divine and human truth" (§ 1968).

### C) *Brotherhood not lived*

Benedict XVI also encourages contemporary exegetes to learn more from how our Jewish brothers, with whom we pray to the same Lord, deal with Scripture<sup>19</sup>. As opposed to Jewish-Christian Dialogue, stock-

<sup>17</sup> E.g. in his address at the Roman Synagogue, January 2010.

<sup>18</sup> NORBERT LOHFINK, "Ein Bund oder zwei Bünde in der Heiligen Schrift?", in: *L'interpretazione della Bibbia nella Chiesa. Atti del Simposio promosso dalla Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede. Roma, settembre 1999*, Città del Vaticano 2001, pp. 272-297.

<sup>19</sup> Talk at the Roman Synagogue, January 2010, § 5 and § 3. Cf. also: PHILIP A. CUNNINGHAM - JOSEPH SIEVERS - MARY BOYS (Eds.), *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today. New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships*, Rome 2011.

taking seems more disappointing when it comes to Muslim-Christian Dialogue. Here are several reasons for that.

- a) With Jews we share the Hebrew Bible. That is, Christians accept the scriptures of the “Old Testament” in the sense of “covenant”: The texts witness action, and the name “testament” says that it is as such accepted by the Church: God’s covenantal action is being verified there. Both Jews and Christians are, by starting from this book of books, making a unique historical claim. We say that God is becoming accessible through his own initiative, and this initiative happens in a particular place and time with a particular people; and thus, for all nations and the whole world. We share history as theological attitude, as credal focus and a confession to this series of events.
- b) There is another theological attitude which we share with Israel because of our acceptance of the Hebrew Bible as basic holy text. Within that history there was promise and disappointment, and faithfulness and development on this level of meaning. Instead of working with terminology, with static definitions, the historical character of the Bible shows us that God is faithful to what He says in a way often surprisingly different from what we expected. Example: How can we be the elected people, if we are lead into exile? Answer: Election is not protection, but the risky task of testimony. So, the concepts that were being used consistently dynamically proved to go in a direction different from the first understanding we had. Christian theological talk has this historical openness which is dynamic faithfulness rather than defined knowledge.

Two other reasons why Jewish-Christian dialogue is progressing theologically with unique efficacy become understandable only when we look at Islam.

- c) The point of dissent with Jews is whether Jesus is the Messiah. The Koran, and therefore Muslims today, speak of Jesus as *al-masīh*. Islam therefore says we accept Jesus as Messiah. Christians can answer that this is a confusion of words, since we mean by Messiah the one through whose life, death and resurrection the final era of God’s salvation has dawned. In dialogue with Jews, there is the reality that, with all difference in what we mean by it, both sides accept that our disagreement is about accepting Jesus as Messiah.
- d) With Islam, moreover, the situation is particular in another sense. A claimed revelation, the Koran, declares that the texts we consider to be Holy Scripture are mistaken. The unicity of Christ Jesus is said to be a product of distortion of what Jesus really

said (Sura 4:171; cf. 5:116), and Jesus' suffering and death are rejected (Sura 4:157).

- e) Muslim theology has, since its outset, had many questions, wordings, assumptions, and methods in common with Christian theology; but socio-political dimensions have their repercussions in theological encounters, too. Although there has always been an international and professional theological discourse in Islam, often exemplary for Christian thinkers, today's Muslims may start from an inferiority complex in the face of what can be seen as Western achievements. Even scholars of Muslim adherence can become unnecessarily apologetic when seeing occidental academic performance, e.g., in philosophical or historical research.

These features make interreligious dialogue difficult, and make Muslim-Christian theological exchange particularly delicate; but not impossible, nor useless, or fruitless. What makes encounter between Islamic and Christian experts especially interesting is that in it, we can discover the core tenets of Christianity in a new light. There are a series of fundamental implications of the Christian faith which will remain controversial with Islam. That is not disappointing; it is rather a consequence of their being fundamental. Fundamental convictions are so basic that it is difficult to change them; so much depends on them! And it is difficult to argue for or against them; the arguments you want to use may rest on these fundamental convictions. Since they are "fundamental", they are not easily seen, they are often implicit; and it is already an achievement to discover them.

One might wonder why there is no real progress in philosophy; human beings are still controversial about questions Plato and Aristotle were already disputing. That's precisely because of the fundamental character of those topics. You can with good reasons hold quite a contrary stance. When we return to interreligious dialogue with that in mind, we are not claiming that the fundamental convictions of Islam and Christianity are arbitrary and simply a matter of your taste and decision. I think we have very good reason to see things the way the Christian faith sees it. Still, we have to be realistic in accepting that many will not share it.

That is because the Christian faith is "costly", it costs something; you have to give up some cherished customs of interpreting the world. That is the *metanoia*, the "change of mind" into which the Gospel "newness" (Romans 6:7) calls us. That is the scandal, the difficult, sacrificial side of Jesus. You can show with good arguments that it is reasonable to trust in this, but you cannot argue someone into accepting it. The three fundamental, controversial implications of the

Christian faith as they can be discovered in dialogue with Islam are here suggested to be these<sup>20</sup>:

1. God is risking his own divinity in history. God is binding himself to the people he elects and wants the success of his Kingdom to depend on our decisions.
2. We have a vocation we are too weak to fulfill. Our call, the fulfillment of humanity is “to love as I have loved you” (John 15:12). With only our effort and predisposition, it is impossible.
3. It is in the other that you come to yourself. The I-thou separations are constantly being challenged and overcome by Jesus (John 12:25, etc.); but self-giving love is no self destruction either. We are able to love because we can enter, in hopeful joy, into the story, persona, and to have communion with Christ: our life is sacramental.

The provisional result. We can now see why it was useful to distinguish different “hopes” in interreligious dialogue.

It is different to hope for “understanding” in practical questions, and to “hope” your partner in dialogue will discover Christ as savior. In practical questions, you can hope for agreement with people of other faith. In the fundamental convictions just uncovered, however, you do not hope for agreement with Muslims. They would in fact no longer be Muslims, if they agreed. Jews, however, can accept them. But there are other controversies in every interreligious encounter. With Israel it is controversial, as we have seen, whether Jesus is the Messiah.

We can now also see why it was useful to call our motivations “hopes”, rather than aims. The conversion of humanity to Christ cannot be a strategic task. It requires the freedom of a person to take the risk of trusting. Not everybody will take the cost to leave his security and trust in a God who hands himself over into a particular history. So we can strive for the fulfillment of this wish with all our existence, in prayer and testimony. We can hope for it; but we also understand that it is part of God’s history of salvation<sup>21</sup> that not everybody will agree in the fundamental implication and in the explicit faith in Christ as savior.

We are reflecting on “interreligious dialogue beyond conflicts”. First we saw that interreligious dialogue is a way of solving conflicts: you can come to an understanding in practical questions because you see the other’s religious foundations. “Beyond conflicts” then meant: leading beyond conflicts. Interreligious dialogue is getting us beyond

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. FELIX KÖRNER, *Kirche im Angesicht des Islam. Theologie des interreligiösen Zeugnisses*, Stuttgart 2008, pp. 328-330.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

conflicts. Now, however, we are seeing something else, we find fundamental controversies and have to say: Interreligious dialogue beyond conflicts – the dialogue is pointing out irreconcilable views, it is not solving all conflicts!

This need not be a shocking result. It can in fact be liberating. It requires, however, some basic rethinking. Islam starts from the proposition that Christianity, Judaism and the Koran's message were intended to be the same. Therefore Muslims can be quite disappointed about a contribution in dialogue that holds: God has bound himself to a particular history; it is only through entering into that history, Christ's death and resurrection that a human being can have the justified knowledge of joyful freedom from sin and death. – Muslims normally presuppose that we Christians declare our theological agreement with them, as they do with us. Christians should, however, not go along here. Why hesitate when interreligious unity is being offered?

To declare that in fact Christianity and Islam mean the same is to prescind from the historical particularity of the history the Bible witnesses. Going beyond that history is a way of generalizing human community with God. Salvific knowledge and love of God thus has become part of our birth equipment. Everybody has it already, you simply have to look into nature, feel into your soul, and think. The view that union with God is natural, leads logically to the claim that theistic belief is rational; little understanding is left for those who do not feel called and graced to belief. Unbelief becomes irrational, or, even, evil. In Christian faith, we claim that our experience of communion with God is not based on our exercise of reflection or meditation. The Christian faith is, rather, the trusting movement of leaving yourself onto a person outside yourself, Christ, who has called you into his life.

Another problem with declarations of core agreement is that it is, of course, the Koran which Muslims want to provide as criterion and explanation of the terms of agreement. Here is an example. Abraham was already a believer; but a believer in the Koranic sense (Sura 3:67), not, however, one who trusted in God's particular election of a people. The Koranic Abraham was a believer just like Muhammad. The defining instance is now the Koran<sup>22</sup>.

Muslim suggestions of interreligious agreement often motivate their efforts by saying a national and even the international unity of humanity can better (or, only) be guaranteed, if we are in religious agreement.

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<sup>22</sup> Even unbelief proves to have salvific consequences in the whole: "*Kata men to euangelion echthroi di' humas / κατά μὲν τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ἐχθροὶ δι' ὑμᾶς* – Concerning the Gospel, they are enemies: for your sake" (Romans 11:28).

That is a dangerous view. We will, rather, have to construct our societies and the future of this world with people whom we accept to be different. We need to shape political systems and societal attitudes in a way that allows for deviation; that respects otherness; that enjoys dissent which is open to inspiration from a variety of conflicting sources. Otherwise a human union that declares to be unified in its existential stances will always look for the evil disturber that is to be held guilty of the failure of our beautiful project of oneness. This dissenter may be called the Jew or the atheist, the gay or the missionary. Religious freedom thus proves to be an excellent test case for whether societal structures are really human, that is, allowing for difference. States must be pluralistic; that includes also allowing for individual believers to be quite exclusivist in their views of salvation.

The project of declaring unity can create a hype of emotion; it is therefore often disappointing when, of all people, the Christians opt out. We have, however, to de-emotionalize dialogue processes. A less enthusing, but in fact more respectful motto than “Our beliefs are the same”, can be the one suggested by the author at the end of the first seminar in the Catholic-Muslim Forum: *We can be friends in difference*. Within that framework of respected difference and interest in that difference, theological dialogue gains new momentum. The following subjects that are, one might argue, on the agenda. Each of them is huge and most of them are traditional; but in dialogue with Muslim thinkers these theological themes receive new insight, if we do not only find the common denominator but try to see the different accents each religion is making.

### *Confession*

The character of language Christians use in theology is different from Muslim ways to express themselves theologically. The biblical word for the Christian linguistic relation with God is *homologia*, that is, “confession”.

- a) We are referring to particular historical events that we profess in gratitude;
- b) we are confessing our own imperfection, including our own linguistic inadequacy – and therefore often use provocative formula; because we want;
- c) in confession, to enter into the new reality, new creation – confession has its original context in handing ourselves over into the reality that is Christ: in baptism. Muslim religious language, from the Koran onwards, is more terminological (cf., e.g. Sura 10:68).



### *God*

The question is so basic that it almost sounds brutal: Looking at Islam, do we have the same God? Official Church documents are in a careful and beautiful way affirming this. *Lumen Gentium* (1964): “*Nobiscum Deum adorant unicum misericordem* – along with us adore the one and merciful God” (§ 16); and *Nostra Aetate* (1965, § 3) “*qui unicum Deum adorant* – They adore the one God”. It is good that the texts do not say “have the one God”. but “adore”. God should not be set before us. We can only try to set ourselves before him. Otherwise we are dealing with him as if he was an object at our disposal. The Christian faith, because of the Trinitarian confession, stresses that even the human ability to “adore”, to live in correspondence to God, is God’s own reality. The Spirit – the relationship that creation can have towards God – is itself God. So for the Christian faith, God is not only the aim of our prayer; but prayer itself is, so to speak, “God happening”. Christian prayer is living Trinity.

### *Prayer*

Can Muslims and Christians pray together? A Christian view of life tries to take account of human weakness. We cannot put ourselves into the right relationship with God. It is God’s particular activity in election and sanctification that gives us the confidence to say we are in communion with Him. The election of the Jewish people has been opened for all humanity in Christ. It is only in accepting his paschal mystery – his death and resurrection – that we have the justified trust that our prayer is truly communion with God. It is a gift of God’s grace – through the history, person and body of Christ – that we can live in God, that is, live a life of adoration. In our public testimony, we always have to show our dependence on God’s particular acting. Therefore, it would be obscuring our witness to God’s elective grace if, e.g., in an assembly event, Christians recited a prayer text simultaneously with Muslims.

### *Prophet*

Can Christians acknowledge that Muhammad was a prophet? In a theological sense, “prophet” means more than “someone who claims to have a divine mission”. For the Christian faith, rather, a prophet is a person who, with a new message, is preparing people for the encounter with Christ. Preparing people for the encounter with Christ is, generally, not what the Koran is doing. In so far, it would be a lack of honesty if Christians declared Muhammad to be a prophet; and they would, thus, also approve wholesale of the message he delivered.

### *State*

Is it possible, for someone who is trying to take the Koran seriously, to approve of state secularism, i.e., structural separation between official politics and Islam? The basic texts and the early history of Islam do not seem to favor such a model. There are, however, serious new approaches in Muslim reflection to argue with the fundamental Islamic texts for a pluralistic correlation of state and religion. For example, Muslims can see the basic Koranic impulse to be a call to conversion; and real conversion presupposes real freedom (Muḥammad Ṭālibī).

### *Rationality*

Sometimes we hear the claim that Christianity is more rational than Islam, that the Bible is closer to human reason than the Koran. That would be difficult to sustain. The Koran is rational in three senses: it appeals again and again to reflection and observation (e.g., Sura 3:13; with a suggestive “perhaps”, e.g., 59:21), it is distinct in its theological terminology (e.g. God *lam yalid wa-lam yūlad* has not begotten and is not begotten – which can be taken as opposing the confusing Christological claims the Church makes, all the way to θεοτόκος/theotokos “bearer of God”)<sup>23</sup>, and the Koran presupposes that people already know what is good (the good is *marūf*, “known”, e.g., 3:104). Islam holds itself to be the religion of nature (*fitra*)<sup>24</sup>.

Concerning rationality, Christianity is in a different situation. It claims that our natural reason still has to be purified. Only through the grace of acknowledging the history of salvation human beings come to see the truth and take part in it consciously. What they discover about the world, about themselves, about God, in this “enlightenment by Christ”, can then, however, be shown to be truly rational; not in the sense of “deducible from principles everyone has anyway” but as “in accordance with all being”. Such new insights of newness would be: personality as becoming-by-self-giving (faithful monogamy, celibacy, incarnation). After the surprise, Christian thought can attempt to come back to rational human concepts and try a new type of philosophy. It is not irrational; but it is not deducible, either.

Dialogue beyond conflicts – even in questions where we will not reach a common view, dialogue is a vital endeavor. It is the place of

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<sup>23</sup> In his Regensburg lecture of September 12, 2006, Benedict XVI seemed to share, if not its form, the contents of Emperor Manuel Palaiologos’ claim that λόγος, rationality, is a Christian domain over against Islam.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the famous *ḥadīth* in the collection of Buḥārī 23,42. All human beings are born Muslim.

mutual learning, enrichment and, possibly, influence. It helps us to see, formulate, evolve our own views; and it is the preparation, exercise, and backup of living conditions in which plurality is possible.

#### 4. WHAT IT COSTS: CLARITY, JUSTICE, SUCCESS

“Into the deep!” is Jesus’ mission to Peter (Luke 5:4). It is an excellent turning word for people who have started seeing the challenge of interreligious dialogue. Peter and his partners<sup>25</sup> have been trying to catch fish all night. They are tired now, cleaning their nets, frustrated because all their effort resulted in catching waste. Simon puts his boat at Jesus’ disposal for teaching the crowd from a short distance within the shallow waters of Lake Gennesaret. This is an acceptable, even comfortable situation for Simon; but suddenly the tone changes. Jesus has a personal mission for Simon. He wants him to set out into the deep. Simon has nothing but his fatigue, and a surprising, authoritarian command; an unlikely “word” (5:5).

Every Christian has a personal mission into a task that is beyond his or her own capacity. Transcending calculable efficacy – that is the point. In interreligious dialogue it is precisely this dynamic that we are experiencing. If we take it seriously, it is risky, it is a sacrifice. We are letting go of three securities.

#### Clarity

There is a fascination, even joy, in following clear argumentations all the way to the convincing conclusion; but the story of Jesus is disappointingly different. As Christians, we are constantly challenged to get beyond our cherished ways of securing ourselves; we are called to reconsider everything. Just think of the priest holding up what one might say is a piece of bread, proclaiming: “Behold the lamb of God!”. It is a call to see what you see in reality in a new way. Interreligious dialogue is a manifestation of this dynamic of risking newness. You cannot know what will be happening. If you are able to predict the results in the other, as well as yourself, it is not a dialogue. If you are not able to see that you might be wrong, and that you may have understood the other wrongly, or your own faith, you are not daring to be in reality contact. Simon is challenged to risk the deep waters; he thinks he knows them but he is able to prescind of his judgment.

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<sup>25</sup> Both for the *metochoi* and the *koinōnoi* in Luke’s narrative the Vulgate has: *socii*.

He trusts the word of Jesus. There was not even an explicit promise in Jesus' sending. He only said: "Let down your nets for a catch". Simon may have heard and seen some of Jesus' convincingness before. Now he simply trusts.

In our way of doing interreligious dialogue, a basic attitude needs to be: trusting. We are called to trust on four levels.

- a) We need to create an *atmosphere* of confidence and, if necessary, confidentiality, in which honesty is possible, in which we can mention doubts, in which we can express experience in an unprotected way, and in which our partners can be heard as persons uttering what they truly feel, see, fear and hope.
- b) We need to be more and more aware of the *status* of our semantic, ethical, theological contributions in an interreligious dialogue. They are tried on historical experience and many good arguments; but that does precisely not mean that we can speak about them boldly. We need to see that our position is weak; we need to acknowledge the investment, the hope, the trust that is involved in saying "Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:11), or even: Jesus is God (cf. John 20:28). Only at the end of history, that will be clear. So we need to leave space and understanding for views different from the Christian faith.
- c) Where a dialogue dares to go beyond the personal sharing, trying to express in a representative way what "my religion means, is up to", a twofold *check* can be trust building: Can what is being said in an official way during a dialogue meeting be made public and thus be endorsed also by the representatives' community of believers? Was it possible also to mention the difficult, dark sides of that religion and reflect on their meaning for today, e.g., harsh verses from the foundational texts or past aggression?
- d) Our language will never be able to clarify everything. Some will always say they do not understand. We need to rephrase again and again, learn from misunderstandings and questions; but we should not strive for a formalized language. Rather, Christians can very well retrieve the old formula and trust in the *sacramental* character of our confession. A word like "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6) is not evident to everybody; it will always require a certain readiness to accept it. This readiness is a gift. But we can also trust that, if we leave demagogic and rhetoric tricks aside, the Christian witness can exert an attraction on human beings.

## Justice

Simon wants Jesus to go away, once he sees that he himself, Simon Peter, is about to become part of a truly new story. Simon has, maybe only now, become aware of his sinfulness. He seems to foresee that he will, if involved in Jesus' mission, make terrible mistakes. Jesus is not accepting sin as an excuse. Just as he can turn a night's failure into a great catch, so he can make a sinful story into part of his own witness. Simon Peter will not be turned into unfailing perfection. He will prove to be a betrayer (Luke 22:58, etc.); but that will not hinder salvation. His betrayal will, rather, become meaningful elements in the history of salvation. Dialogue is more than conflict resolution. We will not solve all problems; but within dialogue, still, some healing can happen. Especially on our own side, if we let go of our fantasies of power and perfection, of our activist and interventionist tendencies.

A genuine dialogue that is sacrificing the idea of justice may have these characteristics:

- a) We can admit that the Church has a history of sins and that we ourselves are over-challenged by the task to present the Christian faith justly. An honestly self-critical attitude is normally quite liberating.
- b) But dialogue can be painful. I am easily insulted by what others say. There is no recipe against wounds or indeed for the cure of such pains; but sometimes there is a possibility to mention my own suffering without using that experience in a self victimizing or otherwise strategic way.
- c) To see that I am not the justice side of a dialogue helps me to see how much dedication and courage, beauty and love there is in the lived faith of other people; Muslims can be heroic in their surrender to God. I must be careful, however, not to idealize the others but rather afford the sense of humor that is needed to deal with other human beings in a human way.
- d) Our attention is also drawn to the fact that in meeting people of other faith, by insecurity and especially in the face of unforeseen events I myself may make mistakes, exaggerate, even lie. Once we realize it, we hope to be able to speak about it, try to explain how it happened.
- e) We should not overestimate the efficacy of interreligious dialogue. We are not creating world peace through a dialogical strategy<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. FELIX KÖRNER, "Einigung jenseits der Religionsgrenzen? Eine Problematisierung von Weltethos- und Naturrechts-Programmen", in: *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 94 (2010), pp. 90-105.

It is more realistic, and even more helpful, to accept that we cannot build world peace but rather try to humbly testify, as Christians, to the fact that every human being has an inclination towards selfishness. Accepting that and still keeping up the dialogues and collaborations is already very much.

## Success

Simon's great draught is no sunshine story. His nets tear. He needs help from other people. Their boats almost sink. Simon has to discover and admit his own incapacity; and even the new job he is getting is not really beautiful: "Catching men"<sup>27</sup>. Again, there is a lot of trusting required that this is really good for humanity, to bring them into a net like fish. A surprising insight is to be gained from this. If we are entering into a dialogue that is inspired by the Gospel, insight is to be gained from this. If we are entering into a dialogue that is inspired by the Gospel, our action will not be crowned by success; rather:

- The quality standard of our action is whether it is done in communion with Christ. Our decisions and expectations underlie the criterion whether they unite us more with Christ. His life was not a success story. It was, rather, *krisis*, and only in Christ's resurrection there is real victory. So, what we need to learn is to desire to follow his – often unexpected – command; we need to set out on our missions in the subtle, mild style that is his own, marked by joy, inner freedom, humility, obedience and trust rather than by efficiency, productivity, heroism and admiration.
- Not thinking in terms of success is no excuse for working only with half concentration, or with an inner reservation; and we should not try to avoid evaluation of our work. It is, however, working with more involvement, if I accept that my own primary measurement of what is a great work may not be Christ's! So discernment, constant examination of our motivations and methods, and a prayer life are called for; that is, moments in our daily lives that do not only support what we have been doing so far, but that can also put them into question and transform them.
- Missions are not to be accomplished. "Mission accomplished" is, rather, a military expression. A real mission of Christ will always

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<sup>27</sup> The verb from which the participle ζωγράφων is formed, "someone who is catching alive, taking prisoner" only appears one other time in the New Testament: 2 Timothy 2:26, where it is Satan's action!

be transformed during the process of its fulfillment. For Christians, it remains important to see that I am not the principle agent in history. It is God's history. He will make a good story out of it all; but often very different from what I thought it should have been. Fundamental indications of whether it is truly his voice that is sending me out into the deep are: am I remaining in communion with Christ? With others? And also with the Church?

We have tried to explore what dialogue beyond conflicts can be. Interreligious dialogue can get us beyond the conflicts of every day questions; but it does not solve all tensions. Some conflicts will remain. Dialogue is, rather, more than a strategy of conflict resolution. It is the readiness to venture into unknown depths out of communion with Christ and in the hope to get deeper into this very communion.