
SPIRITUAL INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

A MUTUAL APPROACH

Akram Khoury*

Notre Dame University-Louaize, P.O. Box 72, Zouk Mosbeh, Lebanon

(Received 16 January 2018, revised 8 May 2018)

Abstract

The existence of multi-cultural and multi-religious societies is a modern-day phenomenon that has served to create a source of richness and a source of anxiety, resulting from strained communication and the outright rejection of the other. Pluralism, in all its forms, reveals a conflict between beliefs due to poor communication. Today's world is desperately seeking and calling for dialogue and communication between religions, traditions and cultures, and looking for common ground that supports clear, transparent and honest communication. We are in need of religious maturity and a religious dialogue model that would serve as a platform to help us better understand who we are, to whom we belong, how we should behave, and how we might come to embrace the great mystery of our mortal existence. This study will focus on the essential characteristics and flexible mentality needed by a participant to engage in productive dialogue. It will focus on a mature approach toward understanding the other and entering into flexible interreligious and intercultural dialogue. It will stress discovering one's relationship with others as well as one's relationship with God and the Universe. The day one truly discovers the other and himself is the day one truly discovers God.

Keywords: multi-cultural, multi-religious, communication, pluralism

1. Communication between human beings - theories on communication

Communication is such a routine activity in human life that human beings fail to recognize its complexity and importance [1]. Scholars have fruitlessly struggled to define 'communication' and the quest to find an all-encompassing meaning has eluded them.

Definitions are therefore flexible tools that provide room for negotiation leading to mutual understanding. In their study on 'Communication Theory and Scholarship' [1], K. Foss and John S. Little focus on the theories of communication that provide a set of useful tools to understand what we call communication. With the rise of communication technologies, communication has revolutionized the twentieth century.

*E-mail: akhoury@ndu.edu.lb

The variable understanding of communication is clearly reflected in the diverging theories of the East and West. Eastern theories stress unity and believe that communication is a result of the natural consequences of events, while Western theories focus on the vision of individualism. Moreover, Eastern and Western communication theories differ in language and oral expression, or are viewed with scepticism. Craig argues that communication is “the primary process by which human life is expressed” [2]. Dance’s argument on the concept of communication, is reflected in three basic dimensions of communication [3]:

- The first dimension explains the level of observation, the process that links and continues all parts to one another.
- The second dimension covers the intentionality by means the process of the two or several communication.
- The third dimension is the normative judgment, i.e. success and effectiveness in a communication.

In communication, we interchange a thought or an idea. The information transmitted, however, is not necessarily received or understood.

2. Communication skills

“The Second Vatican council’s declaration *Nostra Aetate* gives clear indications that inspire the Church for its interreligious dialogue, through the following:

- respect for one’s personal conscience;
- rejecting all forms of coercion or discrimination with regard to faith;
- freedom to practice one’s religion and give witness to it, as well as appreciation and esteem for all genuine religious traditions.” [4]

According to the teaching of the Church, this how we are encouraged to respect the other person as a being man and a being woman, avoiding all pre-judgements, on all God’s people.

3. The need for interreligious dialogue

“Dialogue between religions is a central challenge of our time.” [K. Lehman, *Criteria of Interreligious Dialogue*, *Stimmen der Zeit*, 2009, <http://www.con-spiration.de/texte/english/2009/lehmann-e.html>] Bishop of Mainz Cardinal Karl Lehmann deals with the need and risks of the interreligious dialogue today and in the future and with the criteria by which it is to be judged. A dialogue is not a conversation and not simply a talk. There are many other forms that differ from each other: *A friendly conversation, a scientific discussion, a social agreement-building process*. Dialogue is not a gossip. A genuine dialogue is interested in finding a common solution and in distinguishing the truth. The aim of dialogue is directed toward finding a common solution, unlike a conversation that is based on the exchange of information. Dialogue strives to reach an agreement not only in statements but also as ‘practical discourse’, sharing the correctness of standards. It implies a wide scope of dealing with each

other while giving each in the religious community the chance to express himself. This type of dialogue is described as ‘openness’ and willingness to discuss, as Lehmann expresses. It is the only way to deal with the existing diversity and plurality; the only way to find truth.

At this juncture, dialogue does not limit itself to understanding in the sense of acquiring information; rather, it seeks agreement of what has been discussed in the exchange of knowledge. Hans-Georg Gadamer has described this situation as “the basic model of reaching an understanding together is dialogue or conversation... Reaching an understanding dialogically is impossible if in principle one of the partners in the dialogue does not allow himself or herself to enter in a real conversation”. [5]

Various theological studies raise questions about the interreligious hermeneutics, paying great attention to the effect of religious texts and scriptures on the dialogue and the consequences of personal relationships in a conversation [6]. Raimon Panikkar is one of the pioneers of what is now called ‘comparative theology’ and his influence in interreligious dialogue spans more than half a century. Panikkar calls interreligious dialogue the ‘intrareligious’ dialogue. In Panikkar’s words, “The aim of the intrareligious dialogue is understanding”, and “the ideal is communication in order to bridge the gulfs of mutual ignorance and misunderstandings between the different cultures” [6, p. 10]. He says that if love leads to understanding, then understanding ultimately leads to religious change. He notes, “A Christian will never fully understand Hinduism if he is not... converted to Hinduism. Nor will a Hindu ever fully understand Christianity unless he... becomes Christian.” [7] Panikkar’s interreligious or intrareligious dialogue goes beyond the sharing of information or an examination of doctrines at the personal or ecclesiastical level. What defines commitment to dialogue is growth. He says that one must grow in dialogue. Moreover, he adds, “If the self has not been transcended in this engagement, the dialogue has failed” [7]. His dialogue, therefore, is aptly called ‘dialogical dialogue’, because it travels *dia-logos*, through speech. Panikkar says, “Dialogue seeks truth by trusting the other...” [8]

Some scholars promote interreligious dialogue, as they believe it is a way to stress on respect and understanding between members of different religions, as perceived by Scott Daniel Dunbar in his writings on the role of interreligious dialogue in religions and its effects on society and culture [9]. Others believe that interreligious dialogue eliminates the boundaries between religion and Theology and thus is considered a negative activity. Interreligious dialogue, as defined in the words of Dunbar, is “a respectful communication between two or more persons, committed to different religions about issues of religious significance, in a common attitude of open-mindedness” [9].

4. Criteria for interreligious dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is based on some essential elements that maintain its success. If the conversation topic is approached objectively, then members involved are presented to the other religion in a descriptive way without any

evaluation of the religion itself. This approach generates an open-minded attitude toward learning from the other.

Smith's understanding of the objective study may lead to division and fragmentation, which in his opinion should be replaced by what he called "human knowledge" where the aim is "mutual understanding between or among persons, be it across the centuries or across the world" [10, p. 143]. He writes, "Man cannot know man except in mutuality, in respect, trust and equality, if not ultimately love" [10, p. 143]. Interreligious dialogue is based on the same aspects; hence, making Smith's theory stronger.

For many years, cultural anthropologists have argued that one cannot fully understand another culture by observing it as well. The same contributes to the dialogue, which cannot be fully understood by observation but needs experience as well.

John Carman and Raimon Panikkar have stressed on the idea that interreligious dialogue is fully understood if practiced personally, meaning that personal religious beliefs are the basics of interreligious dialogue.

The basic guidelines of dialogue state that "Interreligious dialogue is not a debate where one side tries to outshine the other, rather dialogue is a team effort where both sides see each other as partners in the common quest for greater knowledge, social action, or whatever they may seek" [8]. This is interpreted as the 'proper attitude' that combines open-mindedness and mutual respect.

5. Pluralism

'A common word between us and you', is a snippet of the message presented in 2007 by a group of Muslims to Christians. These words express the harmony of interreligious dialogue at a time of great religious tension and confusion. It paved the way for high-ranking religious authorities to encourage discussions and dialogue by bringing thoughts and ideals closer.

Religious pluralism aims to reach a wider understanding of religion, rather than pushing the different beliefs into one box. The question is: What is the language that captures multiple religions?

Religions have their unique claims and perspectives; however, religious pluralism reveals the common goal between religions in their interpretation of truths related to spiritual, ethical, or political issues.

Heck suggests the separation of identity from religion, believing that one should not relate believers to their practices only, but must grasp a fuller understanding of religion not limited to an identity set [11]. The pluralistic perspective searches for common ground between religions. Religions are not classified as objects, rather as 'dynamic actors' on a common stage.

Kadayifci-Orellana says: "Religion has been a powerful tool in the hands of political leaders since time immemorial. This is because religion...has a powerful hold on people's way of thinking, acting and perception of interests. Consequently, even though the main reasons and issues may not be of a religious character, religion plays a significant role at times of conflict, especially when

different religious systems encounter each other.” [12] Religion, therefore, is considered a basic identity factor, as discussed by Kadayifci-Orellana. Many citizens and policymakers take decisions based on their religious beliefs.

6. Conclusions

Today, interreligious dialogue is the centre of all religious conversations that bridge cultural differences. We are living in increasing multicultural societies where other religions are no longer ‘vague’ or ‘mysterious,’ rather they have become relatives and neighbours. To avoid conflicts and overcome stereotypes, dialogue has become essential.

Shenk and Duek conclude their discussion about pluralism in today’s world with the following observation: “The affirmation of pluralism, tradition, and particularity affords the post-modern person the possibility to speak out of his or her unique tradition in a confessional way. The assumption that there are no universal narratives, as purported by modernity...means that \Christians and \Muslims can speak from their traditions with new freedom. A peaceable posture affirms difference, is open to the wisdom of the other, and refuses to violently demand the other must conform to my tradition.” [13]

As previously argued, interreligious dialogue is an activity and an attitude, which is not fully understood unless experienced. This experience demands religious commitments “only as methods and approaches meet can we hope to understand and appreciate religion in all its complexity” [14].

References

- [1] K. Foss and J.S. Little, *Theories of Human Communication*, 10th edn., Waveland Press, Illinois, 2011.
- [2] R. Craig, *Commun. Theor.*, **9(2)** 1999 119-161, online at <http://people.unica.it/ernestinagiudici/files/2014/03/CRAIG-COMMUNICATION-THEORY-AS-A-FIELD.pdf>.
- [3] F.E.X. Dance, *J. Commun.*, **20** (1970) 201–210.
- [4] M.L. Fitzgerald, *Pope John Paul II and interreligious Dialogue*, L'Osservatore Romano, 25 May 2005, 8, online at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/chistory/intrejp2.htm>.
- [5] H.G. Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 2007, 70.
- [6] R. Panikkar, *The Interreligious Dialogue*, Mahwah, New Jersey, 1999, 6.
- [7] R. Pannikar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, Orbis Books, New York, 1981, 43.
- [8] R. Pannikar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics: Cross Cultural Sutides*, Paulist Press, New York, 1980, 243.
- [9] S.C. Dunbar, *J. Ecumenical Stud.*, **35(3/4)** (1998) 455.
- [10] W.C. Smith, *Objectivity and the Humane Sciences: A New Proposal*, in *Modern Culture from a Comparative Perspective*, J.W. Burbidge (ed.), State University of New York Press, New York, 1997, 121–146.
- [11] L.P. Heck, *Common ground Islam, Christianity, and Religious Pluralism*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, 2009, 9-10.

- [12] S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana, *Muslim Perspectives on War and Peace*, in *Peace Building By, Between and Beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians*, M. Abu-Nimr & D. Augsburg (eds.), Lexington Books, New York, 2009, 19–48.
- [13] W. Shenk and A. Duek, *Social Location and Christian Identity: Some Historical Perspectives*, in *Peace Building By, Between and Beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians*, M. Abu-Nimr & D. Augsburg (eds.), Lexington Books, New York, 2009, 115- 128.
- [14] E.J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, Gerald Duckworth and Company, London, 1975, 293.