

Reflections on Dialogue

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My first experience of interreligious dialogue was in the forum of the classroom. While a graduate student at Temple University, I took an interreligious dialogue course with Professor Leonard Swidler. He introduced us to his Dialogue Decalogue. These rules for the civility necessary to dialogue that most would think unnecessary actually saved us from hours of irrational behavior. As a class, I think we learned civility and also that dialogue about deeply held, though sometimes erroneous, beliefs and practices was far more difficult than we imagined. The handmaidens of dialogue are angst and introspection. We were introduced to the writings of Raymundo Pannikar and Hans Kung. I had thought that dialogue was just conversation, never imagining any theoretical framework of support. Because the class represented many religious traditions and stages of spiritual exploration, our conversations were enlightening, frustrating, and exhilarating. During a later semester, Professor Swidler made possible an opportunity for me to use what I had learned and to participate in an even more practical dialogue in Koblenz, Germany.

This opportunity was an extraordinary experience. A rabbi and I were the only Americans present and because of him I got to see the remains of concentration camps. This was both a heart-rending experience and one that connected me to the actuality of the modern Jewish experience. One evening we went into the “downtown” area of Koblenz to find a good restaurant. Walking down the streets in the early evening, we passed a club where we could hear men singing, and continuing our slow pace, sightseeing, we heard the shout “Zeig Heil.” We both stopped, frozen in fear, and then ran down the street seeking safety in a nearby restaurant. Later, in reflection, we realized that neither of us knew the new Germany. He knew the Jewish experience of his relatives in Germany while I only knew what was portrayed on American TV. Television in the U.S. does not show much if anything about Germany after WWII, so Germany is frozen in Nazi time for most of us.

We have no idea what measures the German people have taken to recover their humanity or what they done to atone for horrible crimes. I knew from

footage of the Olympics during Hitler's time what he thought of black people as well as Jews, so I was just fearful. I wondered how some Jews could ever enter a dialogue with Christians about the Holocaust. Then I thought — there have never been any such dialogues between white American Christians and the descendants of slaves about lynchings and rapes during or after slavery. What became obvious is that in the absence of dialogues and thus some atonement, hostilities and hatreds grow unabated. While I cannot say what ran through the rabbi's mind, though his face expressed great pain, what ran through my mind was that if a holocaust can be discussed in dialogue then certainly religious traditions can dialogue internally. I also reflected that my experiences as a woman of color had never been the center of any dialogue to which I was invited. In Koblenz, I was the only black participant among dozens and in fact the only black person in town. A part of the dialogue that was silent was about my presence.

In Koblenz we talked our way through a portion of the dilemma of race and religion between Turkish Muslims and Protestant Christian German social workers. Turkish Muslims had been guest workers brought in to assist with Germany's reconstruction after WWII and had stayed beyond their welcome. They of course were still employed largely in menial labor, indicating both a need for their presence and an assessment of their worth. As in the United States, bad economies are in part blamed on foreigners, often causing a violent backlash against immigrants, new and old. I saw some of this attitude in the airport when I arrived. A group of young German men were taunting and kicking at the rolling cart of a Turkish woman for entertainment and without restraint. One problem was that the Turkish community was just old enough to have children born and raised in Germany who considered themselves German though they had not received citizenship. During this time, around 1988, Turkish Muslims living in Germany had laid claims to their German homes and were unwilling to return to Turkey. Their quality of life and the constant violence against them necessitated intervention by social workers. The dialogue was dynamic and fruitful. Those German social workers who came to the dialogue were committed to learning about their clients and the Turkish participants very much wanted to share their desires, dreams, and difficulties.

As my first experiences, though intense, were intriguing practical learning experiences, I continued to accept invitations to dialogue after graduate school. What I quickly learned was that my previous experiences were extraordinary regarding format, representation, and actual dialogical content. When I arrived in Chicago, preparations for the 100th anniversary of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions had begun. Fortunately for me, I was asked to join the Muslim committee. This committee, however, was not

representative of even the Muslims in Chicago let alone the nation, or the world. Evidently, for members of this group of dialoguers, everyone who was not a Sunni immigrant was suspect. They moved to exclude most African American Muslims, as well as Shia and Sufi Muslims, declaring that they did not know them. While this was the starting point, many in the group would later abandon these positions because the steering committee reminded them that the whole event was about dialogue, not nurturing their ethnic and intra-religious prejudices. Remarkably, none of the immigrant Muslims were willing to actually dialogue with those Muslims they initially sought to exclude, although they were available for dialogue with non-Muslims.

In this series of dialogues, conversations were not scheduled meetings with agendas but happened impromptu almost every moment of the day and evening. I loved it. I learned about the scope of intra- and interreligious hatreds and the violence they spawned. These were not discussions about which scripture said what; rather, participants talked about how to use scriptures to stop violence and about potential cooperative projects. It seemed that representatives, even in this atmosphere of community, still talked across traditions rather than from inside of them. That each group had at least to superficially work through internal issues was as important a dialogue as the Parliament itself. The spirit of the Parliament was great but I noticed other smaller things also. I was often the only African American of any religious tradition present in our many dialogues. On the last day, several Protestant ministers of the black churches appeared but their congregants had not been visible participants.

I quickly learned that African Americans were also largely invisible at Christian-Muslim dialogues in Chicago. Blacks were also not present in any of the audiences in dialogues. Christian-Muslim dialogue seemed to me to be a middle-aged, white mainline Protestant affair with South Asian Muslim immigrants. In every subsequent dialogue I attended after moving to Chicago, the same conversations took place. Conservative Christians, black or white, were never in attendance, though there was an obvious need for their presence. This was a big problem for me, along with the fact that African Americans were virtually missing.

One very important cornerstone of racism, as practiced in the United States and experienced by every new immigrant of color, is the refusal to acknowledge the humanity of black people regardless of their class or education. In many conversations, if not most, with white Americans about racism or discrimination or even the weather, the language of the encounter is designed to silence the black person. Whites often feel the need to translate black speech as if the black person is incapable of articulating what they mean

or too unsophisticated to articulate their feelings strongly in ways that are acceptable to whites. This is an interesting phenomenon that exists as a deeply ingrained part of racism. Blacks are expected to be as passionless about lynching as they could be about a change in the weather or the rising cost of milk. When they are not passionless about the horrors inflicted on them in the past or present, whites always assert that the “emotion” stunts the conversation and change the subject. After rendering the black person silent and virtually invisible, the real business at hand can continue.

In dialogues I have attended, when young people, especially children of immigrants, have attempted to join the conversation, their perceptions and experiences have been dismissed in almost the same way that I find myself quieted. Like me, these younger adults wanted passionately to make sense of current events and assertions. Dialogue was not the place, we both found out. On one occasion, for which I have not been forgiven, I invited another African American Muslim to a beginning dialogue. This professional was so angry at being silenced, he made me promise to take him and his wife to dinner to make up for bringing him to “another white folks feeling good about themselves” conversation. Initially, and we mistakenly thought, sincerely, we were asked to comment on what we would like to see as the outcome of the dialogue. After stating our opinions about both the importance of dialogue as a tool for understanding and possible outcomes, we were greeted with the familiar nods and smiles and then summarily dismissed as token participant voices. This is an example of one aspect or rather obvious problem in Christian-Muslim dialogue: Who can participate? If indigenous Muslims cannot be considered “really Muslim” or if the circle of dialoguers is a closed circle, then it would be best if those realities were made clear in the invitation. Such candor would save time and hurt feelings.

As in the Parliament, I have found that in most dialogues, Christians are not talking to each other and Muslims are not talking to each other. Those Christians involved in dialogue are not usually those on Rush Limbaugh’s radio program. Rather they are those who find their faith enhanced in safe talk with others. The Muslims who participate are not those who are spewing venom at American society in the talk of the Friday prayers. These dialoguing Muslims find the space of the dialogue to be a safe time with the other. Don’t get me wrong! I think this is excellent insofar as there are so few safe places these days. I think, however, that dialogue itself is supposed to be a risk undertaken with the twin passions of belief and commitment to a kind of learning that inspires action. While safety is always an issue in a “serious” dialogue as participants bare their souls, it should not always be a safety prescribed by a non-threatening agenda with safe people. I do not see this as a dialogue, but rather a social event with acquaintances where theological conversations take

place. I do recognize that for some, however, this is not only adequate, it is a large step.

My first dialogues were not quiet, rehearsed events but passionate expressions of positions. Each side had issues that the other needed to hear and that other was just as passionate about hearing. Listening, absorbing, reflecting, and then responding so that the speaker knows he or she has been heard is one key in dialogue. If I understand the purpose of dialogue correctly, one aspect is to clear up misconceptions and examine stereotypes while focusing on some issue. Christian-Muslim dialogues that I have attended seemed programmed to forever discuss theology while avoiding the various interpretations that drive some of the violence in the world. I gave up this kind of dialogue but then realized that I was always in some of the most sensitive and stimulating dialogues possible in my classroom.

The everyday, interactive dialogue that takes place at work or in the classroom has become the place to tackle issues for me. My students are mostly Christian and Catholic. They generally have more knowledge of world religions than about Christianity, when they know anything about religion at all. I have to explain each quarter that there are three branches of Christianity. What amazes me more than anything is their ignorance of and hostility toward the religions they have learned about in high school. It is as if the teachers in high schools taught only their personal opinions about those “other” religions. Usually I hear the hostilities and problems with Islam by the end of the first week. Some of the Protestant students have heard their ministers talk about the evils of Islam, while Catholic students either feel sorry for the Muslims “being so backward” or just bewildered by the existence of such “ignorant” people. The classroom is one place where inter-religious dialogue can happen.

Separating truth from fiction is a difficult task, especially when the fictions are a part of what society claims as knowledge. In American society, Muslims are not permitted to speak either about their lives or about Islam. As a result, Americans have never heard Muslims disputing what some Christian and Jewish scholars have put in print or on the TV about Islam and Muslims. The task is an uphill battle. Often when I begin lecturing on Islam, students are openly hostile as they have heard another story that must be true because it was in the news. Islam is veiled and oppresses women. It is violent men who are either terrorists or suicide bombers. Muslims have no ‘real’ religion that makes any sense. Students take notes on the beliefs and practices along with biographical information on the Prophet Muhammad but in their discussion groups they return to veils and violence. As a result, up to the midterm, many students perform poorly on tests because they do not believe what they have heard to be true (and, of course, because they do not study).

Muslim students pose an equally difficult set of challenges for me. Most of my Muslim students are the first generation of immigrant parents. They could never have envisioned in their wildest dreams an African American female Islamic Studies professor. What could I possibly know? Like many of my non-Muslim American colleagues who are scholars of Islam, they wonder if my presence is a result of affirmative action. I could not be real. Additionally, for many of my Muslim students, their knowledge of the Islamic world is as slim as that of non-Muslim students, which is often embarrassing for them. All of this requires a different kind of dialogue — a simultaneous intra-religious dialogue. Juggling dialogues has become a foundational part of my academic existence. I have been cursed for being Muslim; sentenced to spend eternity in hell for being Muslim; challenged on what I know about Islam; and confronted on just about anything the reader can imagine. Needless to say, I take a kind of perverse joy at some of this, while at other times such challenges make me ill. Through it all I have managed to change a few minds or at least my efforts are entertaining enough to cause the illusion. Since my classes remain full at forty students per class with waiting lists of up to fifty students, I think that at least something positive must be going on. Yet, despite these efforts, the events of Sept. 11th, 2001 and the government's assault on Muslims continue to dominate the discussion in every course.

Almost every non-Muslim student is palpably fearful of being too physically close to a student who is obviously Muslim. Almost all of the Muslim students have begun to fall into one of two identifiable patterns. They either are extremely active in discussions or completely silent. By active I mean that they want to tell others that Islam is wonderful and has no problems so everyone should be at ease. The silent ones (often a minority) remain silent even though class participation is worth 20% of their grade. Most of my non-Muslim students think that "all" Muslims should "go back to wherever they came from immediately" if not sooner. Students are now angry at being made fearful with no outlet for discussion. So I have made the classroom a total dialogue event.

My new adversary is the media. The monologue of religion and politics writers has made dialogue in the classroom strained. The religious adherence of the writers is often at issue, especially here in Chicago, because there is only one journalist who is Muslim. While this state of affairs is almost certainly due to the fact that Muslims do not see journalism as a viable career, the new journalistic smear campaign is horrific. My students and I are having a hard time dialoguing over mis-stated facts and innuendos about the Muslim community and some of its members. Most of my students fall into the camp that says that if the media says it without protest from anyone, it must be true. Public reporting about Islam and Muslims presents a major problem for

Christian-Muslim dialogue. I personally am not a conspiracy theorist; rather, I think that the insular nature of the immigrant Muslim community and the quietist attitude of the indigenous Muslim community have turned them into easy prey. Many Muslims have joined Bush in saying that you are either with us or against us. Muslims are quick to threaten those Muslims who are moderate on issues and accuse them of siding with the enemy or being sell-outs. Most Muslim communities are immune to dialogue themselves and have little respect for any discussion of various viewpoints. Yet, in my classroom I can demand dialogue even on sensitive issues with an eye toward new understandings.