

# INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: OLD LIQUOR IN STANDARD NEW BOTTLES

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## Introduction

When confronted with the idea of interreligious dialogue, members of most of the world's religions might well argue that there is nothing new to such discussions; they have, historically, long been a part of each religious tradition. Many of the world's religions, that is, have an extended experience with interreligious dialogue, although they may not have developed the principles and the rationale for dialogue to the degree that those principles and that rationale are now understood. It can be said that contemporary interreligious dialogue has its "official" origins in the Christian missionary attempts to develop relations with and achieve an understanding of other religions, as seen especially at the world missionary conference that met in Edinburgh in 1910.<sup>1</sup> While that conference is particularly noteworthy because it promoted the ecumenical movement as a way to improve relations between Christian denominations, it also gave attention to the inescapable involvement of Christian missionaries with people of other faiths. The following world missionary conference, which met in Jerusalem in 1928, affirmed the "value" of other religions and called on the adherents of the various religions to join together in addressing the problem of secularism, which the Jerusalem Conference saw as an attempt to solve world problems without any reliance on religion.<sup>2</sup>

Religious dialogue, broadly speaking, has taken two different forms. On the one hand, it has involved people of different religions in "interreligious dialogue." Dialogue, on the other hand, has also occurred

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\*This paper was first delivered at a conference entitled "Visions for Religious Studies in the Next Century" in Bangkok.

between people who belong to different sects or denominations within the same larger religious tradition such as, for example, between Catholic and Protestant Christians or between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists. This second form of religious dialogue is termed “intrareligious dialogue.” One important issue that must be considered is the extent to which these various discussions between people of faith provide us today with a creative, effective methodology for university religious studies programs. A second issue that “traditional” interfaith dialogue raises, and one we must consider here, is that of the very definition of interreligious dialogue itself.

### **What is Interreligious Dialogue?**

We usually understand, initially, that interreligious dialogue amounts to discussions about religion that take place between people from two faith traditions for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of each other. This definition is partly correct, but it is incomplete because it fails to encompass all that is involved in interreligious dialogue. When the members of two different faith traditions engage in a comparison of points of the similarities and differences between them, for example, we normally term such discussions as “comparative religion” even though they also fit the general definition of “interreligious dialogue” as well. Comparative religious studies, however, is not interreligious dialogue in the sense we are using the term in this paper. Comparative studies attempt to use the instruments of the scientific method to objectively study religious data without any preconceptions, emotional input, or traditional religious perspectives involved. The unavoidable problem facing the students of comparative religion, we might add, is whether or not they can avoid prejudice when they make comparisons between the ideas and beliefs of another religion with their own faith.

Interreligious dialogue, in contrast to comparative religious studies, involves the expression of emotions and feelings as well as the personal religious beliefs of individuals. The tools for this type of dialogue are subjective, which is to say that interreligious dialogue involves each side in revealing and sharing their feelings concerning firmly held and deeply cherished beliefs. Such dialogue is good, and it has great value

for those engaged in it because it provides each dialogue partner with an opportunity for learning.<sup>3</sup> Interreligious dialogue of this personal nature cannot avoid discussing differences in beliefs, and it is not necessary that it ends with an agreement of opinions. It presents both partners, rather, with an opportunity to learn each other's beliefs and, in the process, to unlearn misapprehensions that one or both sides previously held.<sup>4</sup> Interreligious dialogue also offers those involved in dialogue with the possibility to change their own point of view concerning the actual faith of their partner in dialogue, thus gaining for themselves and that partner a clearer shared understanding. This is what we seek in every interreligious encounter, namely the opportunity to correct our own misunderstandings regarding the faith of those with whom we dialogue.

In spite of the fact that interreligious dialogue is based on an initial willingness to accept religious differences, it is always possible that the dialogue process will cause tension and conflict to arise between those involved in the process. The possibility of friction underscores the importance of learning how to engage in the dialogue process creatively and peacefully in the face of the difference in religious perspectives that both partners in dialogue bring to the process. Dialogue requires, in short, that those engaged in dialogue be sensitive to each other and behave towards each other in a positive manner. They must also avoid the “don'ts” of interreligious dialogue described below.

### **The Do Nots of Interreligious Dialogue**

Participants in interreligious dialogue must particularly avoid the following negative patterns of behavior:

1. Dialogue must not be a matter of superficially accepting disagreement and differences in order to avoid dissension, in what we might term “lazy tolerance.”<sup>5</sup> Interreligious dialogue, that is, does not support the concept of relativism, the idea that everything and everything is acceptable.

2. Dialogue must not be a confrontation as if those engaged in dialogue are enemies, and it must not involve argumentation for the sake of winning.

3. Dialogue must not involve an “imperialistic” or prejudicial judgment on the dialogue partner that is made before dialogue even begins.<sup>6</sup> One must not enter into dialogue, that is, with a either a false sense of pride or of humility. Those involved in dialogue must also avoid belittling or extolling their own beliefs, nor should they judge the beliefs of their partner in dialogue before learning about the partner by listening to how they explain their faith. Individuals sometimes enter into dialogue with hidden feelings of absolutism, which is the idea that his or her own truth is the most correct, complete, and best truth. Such persons intend to rely on that “truth” to judge their dialogue partner, which means in the end that they approach that partner prejudicially.

4. Dialogue must not be merely the exchange of religious data or be nothing more than superficial discussions between the adherents of two religions.

5. Dialogue must not be driven by hidden agendas, for example as an opportunity for proselytization<sup>7</sup> or tricking people in order to gain additional adherents. If changes in belief do take place, they should occur naturally as a part of the dialogue process itself. It is possible for one dialogue partner, for example, to learn about, understand, and come to prefer the beliefs of the other partner, but such a change must not be the basic purpose of dialogue. It is not the purpose of dialogue to be a tool for gaining adherents for one’s own religion.

6. Dialogue must not use a “mixing bowl” method,<sup>8</sup> meaning that it should not merely takes good points from the various religions and blend them into one’s own religion. This approach causes a syncretistic mixing of teachings, or so much combining takes place that a new religion entirely different from one’s original beliefs is the result. Instead of being a “creative” approach to dialogue, approaches of this sort have a negative impact on dialogue because each person who engages in dialogue must be a faithful representative of their tradition and a witness to the beliefs of that tradition. People who do not clearly declare themselves a believer in a particular religious tradition will not be able to explain to their dialogue partners what it is that inspires them in their own religion, why they see it as being good, and what they find in it that is personally meaningful in their lives. This is true even if they have closely studied the belief system of another particular religion. It is

difficult for them to represent the faith of that religion and enter into a dialogue with other religious perspectives because they lack the value judgments that arise out of the unique religious experience of the faith that they are supposed to represent.

### **The Necessity of Dialogue in the Age of Globalization**

The definition of interreligious dialogue with which this article began helps us to understand that dialogue has nothing in common with either absolutism or relativism. It does have a great deal in common, however, with a religiously pluralistic type of religious faith.<sup>9</sup> Such a faith accepts the fact that there are many religions in the world, that there is more than one religious belief system, and that each of those religions has its own way of solving human problems based on its own religious logic. The ultimate goals of the various religious faiths, according to this pluralistic mode of thinking, may or may not be the same. Ultimate reality, that is, may be the same for the various religions, for example, faith in One God; or, it might be something entirely different.<sup>10</sup> The important point is that religious pluralism is willing to accept diversity. The British religious scholar, John Hick, points out that the world's religions differ in three distinct ways. First, they differ according to their adherent's experience of the "divine," which for some religions such as Christianity and Islam is personal while for others it is non-personal, such as the belief in *nippan* (Nirvana) for Buddhists and The Way for Taoism. Second, the various religions differ in their religious doctrine and philosophies and are particularly conditioned by the various ways their teachings have developed historically and culturally. Finally, since each religion expresses its faith in ultimate reality differently each religion also has a particular set of commandments, ways of behaving, and rituals that respond to its particular expressions of faith.<sup>11</sup>

At this point, we can agree that the world's various religions have differences and a distinct identity each within themselves. We can also agree that interreligious dialogue affirms the plurality of beliefs, which means that it accepts diversity, differences, and the fact that there are many religions in the world. The willingness to accept different religious beliefs and practices also reflects the nature of globalization

since one aspect of globalization itself is the willingness to accept cultural and religious variety. It is not possible for us to mandate that everyone should have the same culture or believe the same things, and we have to accept the reality of differences based on that diversity of cultures and religious beliefs. Modern communications and transportation brings that diversity of culture and beliefs into close proximity one with another. They now have close relations with each other in the “global village.”

At the same time, however, the nature of globalization also enhances personal identity, local culture, and the uniqueness of local life as well. The same holds true for interreligious dialogue. The dialogue process is a process of accepting the reality that the spiritual values held by the faithful of the various religions and are not encompassed in a single category. That process demonstrates, at the same time, a willingness to accept the differences between religions and the particular religious identity of each religion. Yet, it is also possible to bring understanding, cooperation, and unity out of those differences, which we might term “unity amid diversity.” It might be said that interreligious dialogue is thus an appropriate method for religious learning, whether it be dialogue between individuals of different faiths or between groups of individuals within the same faith. The problem is how to best establish an appropriate framework in dialogue, one that allows for differing ideas, that encourages people to both speak and listen, and that is a practice which leads to the highest possible levels of understanding and peace.

### **The Starting Point of Interreligious Dialogue**

It was stated at the beginning of this paper that interreligious dialogue should avoid certain dangerous points. It, for example, should avoid using the standards of belief and praxis of one group to judge the beliefs and actions of others. Such an approach we can only label as “imperialistic.” Judgmentalism of this sort takes place because those making the judgments are sure that the truth referred to in their own beliefs is the highest and most perfect truth. It is absolute truth. Partners in dialogue, however, must have a broad mind, one that gives others the opportunity to speak and is willing to listen to the expression of beliefs that differ from their own. Dialogue partners, at the same time, must

have their own place to stand and be truly representatives of the faith they hold. These two aspects of dialogue, that one must be open to the other and yet representative of one's own faith, seem to contradict each other. But it is very important for those who would engage in dialogue to understand from the beginning that each dialogue encounter is not the final word in deciding that the beliefs of people of other faiths are mistaken, inferior, or defective. It is true that each participant in dialogue will try to explain the truth of her or his faith and explain why that truth is important, greatly influences their own life, and should be important or even necessary to the life of the dialogue partner as well. These arguments serve to confirm the faithful stance of the person presenting them and confirm that they are a representative of the faith they hold. At the same time, however, this does not mean that those engaged in dialogue will judge others before they give them an opportunity to explain their beliefs and show how those beliefs differ from their own perspective. Those who say, "I have the final, most complete answer, and those who have revealed my truth to me expect me to use their revealed truth to judge your truth"<sup>12</sup> do not give their dialogue partners a chance explain their own faith. They, instead, decide in advance that their dialogue partner's faith is not as complete or perfect as their own faith, which is taken to be the most correct form of religious beliefs. Opinions of this sort create endless dissension and are detrimental to interfaith understanding.

Those engaged in dialogue, moreover, must have the courage and insight to treat critically in a straightforward fashion the beliefs and practices of their own religion, which means that they must be honestly self-critical.<sup>13</sup> The process of examining one's own religion critically in order to correct particular practices will make that religion even more firm and stable. This advice concerning the need for critical self-awareness in dialogue does not conflict with the need for a person to preserve the unique identity of his or her own religion. Fortright criticism of one's own religion, furthermore, may take the form of new interpretations of religious teaching or encourage a new perspective on religious beliefs and practices that may well be more appropriate to a person's contemporary situation. It is certain, however, that such new perspectives must not be in conflict with the important doctrines found in the scriptures

of one's own religion. When a person taking part in dialogue has no prejudice against her or his own faith and also has no predisposition to favor it, dialogue can proceed in an honest and sincere fashion.<sup>14</sup> It will lead, furthermore, to trust that those engaged in the process will dialogue with each other sincerely to the end that something creative will take place. Creating trust of this nature is important because an important obstacle to interreligious dialogue occurs when there is the fear that if one speaks honestly one party or the other will use what they learn from dialogue in order to increase the number of their adherents. If interreligious dialogue begins with trust and sincerity, it will successfully attain the goals it has set out for itself.

Another important point to remember is that from the beginning of an interreligious dialogue encounter both sides should in fact want to dialogue with each other.<sup>15</sup> If that is not the case, dialogue will amount only to one side interviewing the other, or it will entail only an ordinary exchange of religious information. Those engaged in dialogue, furthermore, should always be talking with each other at the same level, meaning that if the subject of dialogue is doctrinal beliefs each partner must discuss doctrinal beliefs found in their scriptures. If, again, the subject of dialogue is popular beliefs and practices, the dialogue partners should not introduce abstract or technical theological material into the discussions. The point here is to prevent misunderstandings—misunderstandings that will waste time in arguments that are aimed at different situations or concerns entirely.

From what has been said above, it can be seen that interreligious dialogue can take place with individuals of any level from academics who specialize in interreligious dialogue to local people who are not experts in their religion's scriptures but still practice their religion faithfully according to their understanding of it. Local people, too, can share their beliefs so that others will know and understand that set of beliefs.

### **Various Forms of Interreligious Dialogue<sup>16</sup>**

The various forms of interreligious dialogue include:

1. dialogue at the level of scriptural beliefs (Dialogue of Study)

2. dialogue that emphasizes religious experience and practice (Dialogue of Prayer)

3. dialogue for life, which emphasizes solving problems (Dialogue of Life)

The first form of interreligious dialogue, Dialogue of Study, usually is conducted by scholars who want to know and understand, officially, the beliefs of the dialogue partner. Such dialogue encounters, for example, will refer to each religion's scriptures. The purpose of this form of dialogue is to increase wisdom through understanding, which may lead to cooperation in practice as well.

The second form of interreligious dialogue, Dialogue of Prayer, is dialogue by experimental actions. It begins with a sympathetic imagination that conducts experiments based on the implications that particular sets of beliefs have for religious praxis. For example, individuals engaged in dialogue with Muslims might take John Dune's "Passing Over"<sup>17</sup> and practice fasting with their Muslim friends in order to understand the importance of how Muslims gain a strong faith based on faithful religious practice. They would do this (without any thought of changing their religious affiliation) to understand how their Muslim friends are able to fast, hold certain doctrines, and have the motivations that enable them to fast as they do. When a person engaged in dialogue tries this method of imagination and then experiments with the actual religious practice of another faith until he or she understands the ultimate truth underlying that practice, the person is then able to "pass back" into the practice of her or his own religion. This method is dialogue by imagination and by shared religious practice and may lead to a better understanding of the religious experience and highest religious truth or ultimate end of the dialogue partner's religion.

The last type of interreligious dialogue, Dialogue of Life, is a form that emphasizes solving problems that every person of whatever religious persuasion faces. Many people around the world, for example, face problems related to environmental pollution and human rights. These problems are challenging and require immediate attention. If members of the various religions enter into a dialogue that examines the conditions, causes, and possible solutions of these problems in light of the teachings of their own religion and if they cooperate in solving these common

problems, interreligious dialogue will achieve its goal. It will lead, that is, to mutual understanding and cooperation between religions. It will facilitate the bringing of different teachings together to help humanity as much as possible.

The first type of interreligious dialogue, Dialogue of Study, may seem to be merely a form that is conducted by academics dwelling in their ivory towers and involves only ideas without praxis. It is still, however, an important form of dialogue. The second and third forms, which do involve praxis, unavoidably depend on the knowledge and understanding gained from the dialogue of study, which provides them with a foundation for their praxis.

### **Is Dialogue Necessary & Appropriate for Thai Society?**

Interreligious dialogue is necessary for Thai society because Thailand is under the influence of globalization and has been influenced by the fact of global unity. Thai society, which has its roots in Buddhism, is not going to be able to separate itself from Thais who are of other faiths than Buddhism. It is necessary, therefore, for it to develop a religious perspective and practice appropriate to its relationship with people of other faiths. Certain historical factors, furthermore, also give cause to the need for interreligious dialogue. Some groups in Thai society may have deeply rooted doubts about dialogue because of the way in which some other religions have tried to spread their religions in Thailand. There are segments of Thai society that are still fearful and uncertain when it comes to “dialogue between religions” with other religions. This is especially true of other religions that have been accused of having hidden purposes in wanting to learn about and understand Thai religion and society. Such feelings as these in Thai society should be an indication of the need for honest interreligious dialogue between Buddhism and other religions. They indicate the need for opportunities to discuss doubts and to understand each other’s methodologies in order to do away with doubts and in order to gain a correct understanding of other religions.

Moreover, many groups and people claim that Thai society and religion has its own unique identity, one that preserves an underlying unity and is not characterized by being divided into many sects and

denominations. Thailand does not, therefore, need an ecumenical movement as do some other religions. Thailand, furthermore, more or less has religious freedom and is religiously peaceful to a degree. There is, these groups and people claim, thus no need for interreligious dialogue, especially because they fear that the consequences of dialogue will be more negative than positive because dialogue might expose doubts and fears that are best left uncovered. In spite of such thoughts, Thai society should consider again its understanding of the usefulness of conducting interreligious dialogue. An event that took place in B.E. 2538 [C.E. 1995] gives clear indication of this need to reconsider the value of interreligious dialogue. In that year, a religious organization attempted to hold a seminar involving Buddhists and members of another religion from India. The seminar, however, was cancelled because of the suspicious behavior of the international organization that sponsored it. There was a fear that it might be trying to use Thailand as a stage for creating interreligious dissension for its own advantage. The problems concerning the intentions of the seminar's organizers is not a subject we need discuss here, but the important point that I want to point out here concerns an interview on the matter given by one highly placed Thai official. That official stated, "No one organizes interreligious dialogue seminars; they are a danger that can create dissession."<sup>18</sup> This statement reflects a failure to understand the true purpose of interreligious dialogue. It also reflects a widely spread suspicion or even fear in Thailand concerning the fallout that can follow from interreligious dialogue. This example points to the pressing need for an understanding of the principles, purposes, values, ways, and perspective regarding dialogue and interfaith relations that should be widely disseminated among students and the general public. The danger is that interfaith misunderstanding, suspicion, and mistrust might lead to a general unrest in society.

## **Conclusion**

Each encounter in interreligious dialogue, in sum, is not necessarily an end in itself, and we cannot expect that each encounter will be completely successful. This is because of the complexity of the interreligious dialogue process itself and because of self-centered human

nature, which causes people to look at dialogue as a process difficult to bring about successfully. It should be, however, a challenge for religious scholars and those with a broad mind to accept the reality of religious “variety and differences.” They should be able to use the epistemological methods of interreligious dialogue and reap the benefits of those uses, which will enable them to solve the problems of interfaith dissension. The unofficial methods of dialogue of the past are worthy of study to the end that a proper official theory and praxis of dialogue can be obtained, a theory and praxis that reminds us of the old, long familiar “liquor” that is now placed in a “standardized” bottle for the common benefit of religious people of all faiths.