

# Fundamentalism in Dialogue

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IN QUESTIONS OF doctrine, interreligious dialogue seems to love a vacuum. Conflicting tenets of faith appear to fall, like the feather and the iron plumb, with the same gravity. Judgment is suspended in the name of mutual understanding and amicable discussion. Human societies, on the other hand, where religious doctrines are practiced, where their performance is insured by theologies and moral principles, where they are embraced as ideals for institutional preservation and expansion, seem to abhor the vacuum. Difference and judgment are the life's blood of religious doctrine; nondifferentiation and equanimity are mere abstractions. Religion is lived in the buzzing world of the vernacular; dialogue seems to thrive in a kind of philosophical Esperanto whose grammar and vocabulary are all but useless for the day-to-day demands that people make on their beliefs. To some, this distancing of doctrine from the everyday reality of religion makes the dialogue seem distasteful, unreal, even dangerous. For many of those engaged in the encounter with other religions, it is seen as essential.

As familiar as all this sounds, the distinction between the place of religious doctrine in dialogue and its place in the daily life of religion is no more than a crude charcoal sketch. No sooner does one begin to paint the canvas with color and nuance than its outlines disappear and something very different take shape. The confrontation of dialogue with fundamentalism is a case in point.

When I was first introduced to the world of interreligious dialogue, almost 25 years ago, the very idea of dialogue and everything it represented was largely eyed with suspicion by the Christian churches. True, the World Council of Churches and the Vatican Council had issued dramatic statements in support of peaceful coexistence among religions, and even hinted at the need to dismantle the theological modes of thought that had validated the missionary dream of conquering the world for Christianity. But when it came to actually setting out in that direction, to reallocating resources and personal away from established institutions to enter into dialogue with non-Christian religious traditions, or to propose theological models suited to the fact of religious pluralism, the churches were quick to draw on the reins and temper the enthusiasm for making a clean break with the past.

In the meantime, things have changed. The dialogue among religions is now a permanent feature of the way Christianity understands its role in history that no author of fundamental theology or seminary educator can ignore. The academic output on the subject, from learned societies to specialized journals to doctoral dissertations, attests to the vitality of the dialogue. Far from a single-minded crusade by a small band of reformers, Christianity's pursuit of dialogue has become as plural and diverse as religious truth itself. Largely freed of the shadow of suspicion, it has also become more vigorously self-critical.

Two important facts, however, have not changed in the last forty years. First, Christianity stands in the vanguard of the dialogue among religions, and it stands alone. This is true both within and outside of predominantly Christian cultures. There is no other religion, new or old, world or local, whose commitment to the dialogue with any other religion can be compared to the Christian engagement. Indeed, as far as I know, there are few initiatives taken in any aspect of the dialogue—intellectual, institutional, contemplative, and practical—that do not depend on Christian participation.

Second, the entire dialogue enterprise is viewed with distrust by large segments of the Muslim world as a covert form of neo-colonialism. The conciliatory and open-minded attitude of Christians seeking dialogue, even though effusively repentant of the intolerance and persecution that stain the past of the Christian mission, is seen as little more than the masquerade of a new crusade against Islam: the methods have changed, the goal remains the same. In place of military, cultural, and economic weaponry, the dialogue has replenished its arsenal with the great advances made in the study of religion and theology during the twentieth century in predominantly Christian lands, in order to impose its own self-understanding and ideal of a modern religion on what it sees as a backward, unenlightened, and oppressive form of religion.

There are, of course, growing communities of Islam, and not only those who have settled in the West, who do not share this attitude but welcome dialogue with Christians; just as there are still sizeable bands of Christian missionaries who reject dialogue in favor of direct methods of converting as many Muslims as possible to Christianity. This fact only makes the portrait of Christian interreligious dialogue look more like a grotesque caricature, and makes those seeking dialogue wonder why their conciliatory steps seem more powerless to correct it.

Clearly, something is radically amiss with the dialogue, and no amount of effort concentrated on those Muslims who are open to dialogue can sweep it under the rug. The question is where to stand to assess the situation and look for a solution. Neither commitment to the dialogue nor opposition to the dialogue provides such a standpoint. If anything, the trust and the distrust cancel each other out, and they do so on the grounds of religious faith. The diagnosis requires a more neutral position, a common ground on which the defenders *of* dialogue and the defenders *against* dialogue can both be called to task.

For my part, I am inclined to believe that more vigorous self-criticism by those engaged in the Christian dialogue can bring to light those of its tacit assumptions that are viewed as impediments by those of other faiths and adjust them. But this can only be effective if the nature and extent of that self-reflection is acceptable to the adversaries of Christian dialogue and a stimulus to their own self-reflection. In other words, the common ground must not lay *outside* the opposing positions—like some detached, disinterested philosophical court of mediation—but *within* them, at a point prior to the judgment that separates them from one another. The search for such common ground begins in the recognition that what we are dealing with here is a clash of fundamentals that can only be reconciled by finding a way to bring the question of fundamentalism into the dialogue.

The choice of words may need some explanation. I understand *fundamentalism* here in the restricted sense of doctrinal absolutism and intolerance, leaving out questions of the critique of secular society, messianic expectations, political aspirations, and even the question of scriptural inerrancy (in short, the whole range of characteristics treated in Martin E. Marty and Scott Appleby's "Fundamentalism Project"). This is what I take to be antithetical to the spirit and aims of dialogue, and unworthy of human intelligence.

I do not believe there is much to be learned from fundamentalist positions per se, whether they be found in one's own faith or in that that of another faith. But there *is* a great deal to be learned through liberation from fundamentalistic elements that infect religion, whether in the form of openly professed beliefs or of unquestioned assumptions.

The search for a common ground for friends and foes of particular modes of inter-religious dialogue begins, then, with a renunciation of religious absolutism and intolerance. In positive terms, this amounts to *an expression of trust in the religious dimension of the human*. Such trust understands that religious traditions do not survive merely by one generation of believers educating the next in a body of irrefutable truths; they require something that *cannot* be taught: a restlessness of spirit, a native disposition towards a higher reality than the one we can see. All of us, by nature, seek that “something more” that religions have tried to help us find. This much can be known and understood from our own experience. But trust in the religious dimension of the human also demands a leap of faith: first, that we are not deceiving ourselves in following these impulses; and secondly, that we *are* deceiving ourselves if we think our minds and hearts are large enough to grasp the whole of what we are being made to seek. To trust in our native religious disposition is therefore to believe that it is enriched by diversity of form, by the freedom to express itself and criticize its findings. It accepts that, in principle, no one path is superior to another. In fact, individuals and societies, in some degree or other, end up mismanaging the religious side of life and abusing the nobler remnants of its past. This is why trust in the religious dimension of the human demands continued reform of the expressions it works out in the historical world. Absolutism and intolerance of religious diversity halt impede that reform and reject the trust on which it is based. In this sense, fundamentalism is not merely the assault of one form of organized religion on another, but an assault on the religious dimension of the human itself. It is hardly surprising that, in certain aspects, some forms of religion *are* better than others, and some doctrinal traditions superior to others. In certain aspects. No expression of faith can be superior to all others in all aspects.

This act of trust in the religious dimension of the human, and its rejection of fundamentalism as a form of radical distrust, is neither purely rational nor purely religious, but a condition for the possibility of the meeting of religion and reason in religious expression. It is not a privilege of education or philosophical leisure. It is the very same trust that moves people to respect the diversity of religious interests and practice within their own circle of family and friends, or to be attracted at one time to one part of the tradition they were raised, and at another time, another. It is the same trust that leads a person of faith to ask questions, raise doubts, and make demands of that faith. It is an instinctive sense that I belong to a religion because religion somehow belongs to me. Only the tiniest fraction of those who exercise this trust every stop to articulate it, or to reject it unilaterally in a deliberate choice for religious or antireligious intolerance. This is because it has

more to do with one's attitude to the innate disposition to religion than with anything like a formal creed or a fundamental theology.

Now if we may assume that fundamentalism is basically an act of mistrust in the religious dimension of the human and not the result of intellectual discipline or careful reasoning, justifying the position by logical argument or appeal to sacred texts is a consequence, not a cause of the position. In that sense, it is immune to criticism by reason or exegesis. When have intolerance and absolutism of any form, including religious fundamentalism, ever been overcome by counterargument? No sooner does one try to think of an example than the mind is flooded with counter-examples. No linking of propositions into logical chains, however carefully executed and however theologically sound, can every hope to compete with a mistrust that is, by nature, pre-rational. This holds as much for *essential* fundamentalism, which is articulated as a permanent feature of religious faith, as for *incidental* fundamentalism, which creeps into one's beliefs unconsciously and clings like a parasite to even the most open-minded and tolerant of faiths. In both cases, the only way to liberation is through conversion.

### III

As mentioned earlier, given the problem of the Christian dominance of interreligious dialogue and its perceived neo-colonial ambitions, there is little advocates and opponents of interreligious dialogue can do to analyze it objectively, let alone resolve it, by addressing it head-on in rational discussion. Actual liberation from the impasse can only come through a conversion of individuals, one by one, to a new standpoint. This is not itself something that can take place in dialogue with others, let alone in dialogue with those who hold opposing opinions. Still, it may be possible to focus a dialogue between the two sides in such a way as to stimulate the conversion and at the same time to shed light on whatever incidental fundamentalism underlies the conflict.

Assuming the conscious expression of trust in the religious dimension of the human as a common ground at which to meet, and a repudiation of fundamentalist positions as destructive of that common ground, we still need a way to speak to differing doctrinal traditions without getting tangled up in the doctrines themselves. I am not advocating an ascent to heights of abstraction at which all religions converge in a great cloud of unknowing, but rather the opposite: a descent to the immediate concreteness of the world in which to suffer together the sting of conscience at the sight of what people are doing to one another in the name of religion.

The fulfillment of such dialogue comes in a conversion of our attitudes towards each other, a new way of seeing, not a joint declaration about how to respond to some specific problem or other. Such changes of attitude do not come about by

lining up the alternatives and then deciding, for one reason or another, which is best. Conversion is a result of seeing something one had not seen before, and then deciding whether to take that standpoint and look at familiar things again—or not to. It does not aim at a catalogue of things Muslims and Christians, for example, might have to teach one another. It is a return to the naïve sentiments of conscience, unembellished by theology and ethical principles.

Students of liberation theology often get the idea that it was a revolutionary movement that began from an application of the principles of the gospels to social and institutional evil. This may be the way it has been applied and developed, but its origins are the exact opposite. It was born the way all major upheavals in morality are—*awareness of disorder had reached the breaking point*. The level of structural violence crossed a critical threshold beyond which growing numbers of people could no longer close an eye to it. It overflowed existing categories for understanding and combating it. In this situation, certain individuals took it on themselves to return to their scriptures and theological tradition to search them for insight into what it is they were seeing. They did not invent anything new; they rediscovered what had been there all along, much the same way as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had done a decade earlier. The Jesuit slave owners of seventeenth-century Brazil did not have a scripture or doctrinal tradition different from that of the liberation theologians; they had access to the same philosophical principles as the General Assembly of the United Nations did in 1948. But they saw the world from a different perspective. In the light of hindsight, we accuse them of lacking conscience; in the hindsight of the next generation, we may expect today's inter-religious dialogue to stand accused, for different reasons, of the same thing.

It may be that the Christian commitment to interreligious dialogue has also crossed a kind of critical threshold, and that the accusations raised against its latent fundamentalism may turn out to see something that its proponents, in all innocence, are missing, and that its opponents, in no less naïve fashion, have mistaken for the essence of the dialogue itself. In such circumstances, the decision to come together to a long look at the damage and destruction that religious fanaticism is inspiring around the world—whatever the motives, whoever the victims—and to feel together the sting of conscience may be the only place to start. It begins as an act of trust in our common instinct to flinch in the face of evil. But it cannot blossom into the sort of conversion that will transform the dialogue unless it also renounces conventional modes of thinking and acting. Nothing inhibits conversion more than the rush from a first glimpse of a wrong being done to a call for judgment and action, as if the only thing we needed to do were to act according to what we already knew to be the right thing to do. The complicity of religion is too real and too subtle a possibility to be swept aside so quickly. The problem lies in our way of seeing, not in a mere failure to act.

Seeing things afresh, especially familiar things, takes time. It also requires a new language. Fortunately, both Christianity and Islam have long mystical traditions on which to draw in finding new terminology to speak of each other, and perhaps also to readdress the question of warfare—military, economic, cultural, or ideological—waged behind the shield of religion. (On the Christian side, one thinks particularly of Ramon Llull, whose efforts at introducing the natural world into theology as a bridge between the Abrahamic religions represent one of the most creative and prolific, though also one of the most unknown, chapters in the story of dialogue.) I suggest that a patient look at mystical literature for models of religious conversion become a second focus of the discussion, not only to complement the focus of conscience on religiously-inspired violence, but also to foster self-reflection on fundamentalist elements only dimly perceived in the interreligious dialogue of today.

To the victims who cry out for some relief from religiously inspired violence, the slow and patient exposure of conscience to the grotesque inhumanity and impiety of it all must surely look like a luxury they do not need and we cannot afford. Faced with the need for action, the vacuum of the dialogue can only seem a withdrawal into moral indifference, and the attempt to speak in the language of the mystical path from experience to insight to conversion, so much self-righteous gibberish. They are, in an important sense, right. There is no guarantee that the suspension of judgment and concrete action that are the heart of dialogue will bear any fruit at all, and certainly not in the immediate future. But in the same spirit as those who refuse to abandon their religious tradition in spite of the conflict it has caught them up in, and turn in desperation to prayer, so, too, those who trust in the religious dimension of the human are drawn to dialogue as a way to try to see more clearly what religious zeal has been obliterating from awareness. Both are a dose of mysticism in the everyday life of religion. In the case of interreligious dialogue, it may not be an antidote, but at least it is an attempt to identify how far the poison has been self-inflicted.