The Past, Present, and Future of Theologies of Interreligious Dialogue

EDITED BY
TERRENCE MERRIGAN
AND JOHN FRIDAY
THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF THEOLOGIES OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE
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Introduction

Rethinking Theologies of Interreligious Dialogue

Terrence Merrigan

THE CRISIS OF THEOLOGIES OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

In the world of commerce, perhaps nothing is more indicative of a crisis than the attempt to “rebrand” a product. The recent history of the theological discipline that seeks to address the relationship of the Christian religion to other religious traditions would seem to indicate that this is no less true of academia. What was once the theology of “non-Christian religions” is now identified as, among others, the theology of religions, the theology of dialogue, and the theology of interreligious—or interfaith—dialogue, and all of these terms are as controverted as they are rich in nuance. More recently, it has been argued that meaningful engagement with other religious traditions is only possible if it is preceded by a thoroughgoing immersion in those traditions, that dialogue must be rooted in the practice of so-called comparative theology or interreligious hospitality, both of which are predicated on the willingness to learn from the religious other.

Of course, the word “crisis,” at least in the original sense of the term, need not connote the panic that characterizes most commercial attempts at rebranding. A “crisis” (from the Greek krinein, meaning to separate, distinguish, or judge) is a turning point, a decisive moment, perhaps even an “opportunity.” It is, in any case, a moment to take stock of what has been achieved, to acknowledge and address the challenges arising out of the contemporary context, and to ponder how best to prepare for a future that, perhaps now more than ever, is shrouded in the shadow of conflicts fuelled by purportedly religious sentiments.

Theologians who take it upon themselves to consider the ways in which the Christian religion should engage with other religious traditions find themselves
moving along a continuum between venerable precepts forged out of the struggles of their forebears in faith, and novel insights born out of those multifarious encounters with the religious other which our increasingly globalized world makes possible. They are, in short, always engaged in negotiating the tension between established doctrine and ongoing discernment. The essays collected in this volume contain some of the fruits of that tensile endeavor, and throw light on the “strategies” which have been developed to combine loyalty to tradition with a willingness to engage with the religious other.

The object or goal of that engagement is itself a matter of theological soul-searching. A survey of the extensive literature dedicated to the theme of interreligious reflection would seem to suggest that it is primarily about the promotion of “dialogue.” For better or worse, “dialogue” is perhaps the most ambiguous term in the vocabulary that has developed around the challenge to religions posed by globalization and pluralization. Scratch the surface of this term and a whole range of interrelated issues make their appearance, including questions about the precise aims of dialogue, the appropriate (or necessary) conditions for dialogue, the topics to be discussed (or avoided) during dialogue, the criteria for evaluating the success (or meaningfulness) of dialogue, and so on. The density of the term might lead one to consider abandoning it altogether, but this would be a category mistake. Dialogue is precisely the collection of issues mentioned above as well as a host of other issues which might only make their presence felt in a particular instance of dialogue among an equally particular group of participants.

Dialogue, it might be argued, belongs among what G. K. Chesterton described as “a third class of primary terms,” namely, those “popular expressions which everyone uses and no one can explain; which the wise man will accept and reverence, as he reverences desire or darkness or any elemental thing.” According to Chesterton, we should not “suppose that [a] word means nothing because [we] cannot say what it means.” Were we able to say what the word means, Chesterton remarks, we “would say what it means instead of using the word.” Indeed, according to Chesterton, “the word that has no definition is the word that has no substitute.”¹ At least for the time being, there would seem to be no adequate substitute for the word “dialogue” when it comes to identifying the object of the many and diverse initiatives and enquiries with regard to other religions and their members which have been produced within Christianity in recent decades.

There is no longer (if indeed there ever was) a more or less homogenous theology of interreligious dialogue, and the so-called classical or mainline

perspectives, to the degree that these can even be clearly identified, have come under increasing strain. The diversity of perspectives reflected in this volume (which seeks to move beyond the rehearsal of traditional positions, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant) attests to the emergence of revisionary and novel approaches to contemporary challenges, and to the impossibility, in the present context, of constructing a neatly circumscribed presentation of the past, present, and future of the theology of dialogue. In our allegedly post-modern context, with its demand to be attentive to the particularity of all traditions, it is perhaps not surprising that reflection on what has been on offer, what is now available, and what presents itself as a possible way forward, bears more resemblance to a patchwork than a mosaic.

That being said, the positions developed here do exhibit real consistency since all relate to the “triple axis” that is at the heart of any and all theological reflection, namely, “tradition,” “experience,” and the “encounter with otherness.” Tradition (which, of course, includes the Bible) is the fruit of appropriated experience (which shapes but does not constitute tradition), and is always (and has always) been challenged by encounters with otherness (novelty or alterity, i.e., that dimension of experience which resists assimilation into established tradition or challenges its foundational presuppositions), whether this otherness take the form of heresy, internal divisions, shifting social mores, non-Christian religions, and so forth. Of course, while these three (tradition, experience, and otherness) are inseparable, they are not reducible to one another, and the contributors to this volume manifest a preference for one or the other as the leitmotif shaping their responses to the challenges presented by our globalized and religiously pluralistic world. Of course, these “responses” do not exclude one another. All of the authors seek to draw lessons from the past, with a view to addressing the needs arising out of the present and charting a course for the future of interreligious encounter. Moreover, all endeavor to engage with tradition, experience, and the reality of otherness in a creative fashion so as to open up novel perspectives which are not (yet) part of their home traditions.

Not so long ago, the theology of religions was largely directed inwards, shaped by a concern to find resources within the home tradition to address the reality of increasing religious pluralism, or intent on warding off the perceived threat posed by the so-called pluralist theologies of religion, which argued for the essential parity of the world’s great religious traditions as paths to ultimate fulfillment. Today, for cultural and philosophical, as well as theological, reasons, there is a much more pronounced interest in alterity, a determination to do justice to the religious other in their particularity. The attention to alterity permeates the contributions to this volume, whether the authors find their terminus a quo in tradition, religious experience, or the encounter with otherness. The perspectives which these starting points make possible are the subject of the following reflections.
At first glance, tradition might seem an unlikely starting point from which to develop a response to phenomena as modern (or even postmodern) as globalization and pluralization, and the epistemological crisis which goes with them. This is, however, only the case if tradition is viewed as an assemblage of static, propositional, and ahistorical truths, the meaning of which bears no relationship to the contexts in which they were formulated. Tradition, as the term is used here, refers to the accumulated wisdom of the Christian Church, the wisdom born out of its experience in and with the world, and expressed in its manifold forms of worship, its complex systems of theological thought, and its variegated approaches to ethics. Clearly, tradition here is by no means monolithic and cannot be seen as unrelated to concrete experience. Tradition is, so to speak, the collective consciousness of the Christian community, a framework (often implicit) of thought and practice which is rooted in the experience of previous generations of believers and which is continually reshaped by the experience of their successors. Experience and tradition need not necessarily conflict with one another. On the contrary, they make one another possible, such that it is better to speak of tradition saturated with experience than simply of tradition or experience.2

From the perspective of Catholic Christianity, one of the foundational doctrines of Christian tradition is the incarnation, that is, the claim that God became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This doctrine grounds the sacramental view that is constitutive of Roman Catholic self-understanding. Terrence Merrigan draws on the work of John Henry Newman and supplements it with the thought of Paul Tillich to reflect on the potential significance of “sacramentality” for a renewed approach to other religions. Despite their very different theological persuasions, Tillich and Newman were acutely sensitive to the fact that, as Tillich put it, “the experience of the Holy” always takes place “within the finite,” or, as Newman declared, that “the visible world is the instrument, yet the veil, of the world invisible.” For both thinkers, the acknowledgment of this “sacramental” principle issued in a profound respect for “lived religion,” though they differed in their views on how the “demonic and secularistic distortion” of religion could be avoided. In a fashion shaped by their respective traditions, Newman and Tillich together bear witness to the fact that a “sacramentally oriented” theology of religions cannot but pause and reflect upon the abundance of spiritual and moral goods manifest in non-Christian religious traditions.3

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3 The notion of “moral and spiritual goods” (bona spiritualia et moralia) features in the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions (Nostra aetate) issued by
Such a theology is, so to speak, predicated on the conviction that “lived religion” is the only valid testimony to the divine presence and that where such testimony is given, one must tread carefully for one may be standing on “holy ground.”

The Christian understanding of the person of Jesus of Nazareth, which issued in the doctrine of the incarnation, required a fundamental rethinking of the nature of God, the fruit of which was Trinitarian theology. The development of this theology was a very uneven process and pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit), in particular, was often neglected. Dermot Lane proposes a thoroughgoing reappropriation of the biblical and theological tradition of pneumatology. Such a reappropriation would contribute not only to a renewed self-understanding on the part of the Church, but also to a significant shift in its understanding of God’s presence in the world, in history, and in non-Christian religions. Lane finds significant traces of a move in this direction in the documents of Vatican II, and even more so in the thought of Pope John Paul II, but much work remains to be done. What is needed is indeed “a re-configuration of the theological imagination,” a willingness to rethink “the background understanding and overall framework within which God-talk takes place.” Such a reconfiguration would do more justice to the biblical account of God’s engagement with humankind and allow the theology of interreligious dialogue to take its rightful place in the life and reflection of the Church, instead of being regarded as an appendix or an optional extra.

The quest for an adequate discourse to allow engagement with non-Christian religions which, for the ancient and medieval Church, were primarily represented by Judaism and Islam, has long been an element of the Church’s life. One of the most illustrious attempts in this regard was undertaken in the thirteenth century by Raymond Llull (1232–1316). As Annemarie Mayer explains, Llull was no stranger to religious pluralism, having been born on Palma de Mallorca just three years after the territory had been reconquered by the Spanish following three hundred years of Muslim domination. Indeed, Muslims constituted the majority of the population, and the island also counted a significant Jewish minority. What makes Llull’s attempt at engagement remarkable and prescient was his determination to do justice to the religious views of his Jewish and Muslim interlocutors. Llull had learned Arabic, was familiar with Hebrew, and was thoroughly versed in Islamic thought and practice. Moreover, his method was predicated on the quest for some common ground which could serve as a starting point for what we today would describe as “a dialogue of theological exchange,” that is to say, an

interreligious encounter “where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.” Indeed, Llull might well be described as a “comparative theologian” *avant la lettre* with his insistence on the need for a thoroughgoing knowledge of the religious tradition of one’s dialogue partner and a willingness to respect it in its distinctiveness.

The sincere determination to acknowledge and respect the “otherness” of one’s partner in interreligious dialogue has not always characterized Christian attempts to engage with Judaism in either its depths or its variety. Gavin D’Costa traces the checkered history of Roman Catholicism’s relationship with the Jewish people, with particular attention to the teaching of Vatican II and the theological discussions which it has engendered. From the beginning, the Catholic Church (and indeed the entire Christian tradition) has shaped its own self-understanding, at least in part, by reference to the religion of Jesus of Nazareth. Not infrequently this religion has been portrayed in the darkest of hues, and its essential features only discussed with a view to highlighting the superior attributes of Christianity. The shift in perception which is evident in much (but by no means all) modern religious discourse and theology has been purchased at an incalculable price. That being said, the past is never far away, especially when the Church seeks to determine how she can fulfill the dominal command to preach the gospel to all nations and peoples while acknowledging her theological and historical debt to the Jewish people. D’Costa reviews the options in this regard, as well as reflecting on the varied responses to Christian proclamation within the Jewish community. What emerges from his reflections is a very contemporary portrait of the promise and pitfalls of any and every attempt to engage with tradition, especially one as theologically charged and history-laden as the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

The contemporary “crisis” of interreligious relations has inevitably had an impact on the discipline which had set itself the task of defining (or delimiting) the frontiers where, and the conditions under which, the encounter with the

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In this document, the Council, building on previous official statements, identified four forms of dialogue (“without claiming to establish among them any order of priority”): a) the *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations; b) the *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people; c) the *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values; and d) the *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.”
religious other would take place. Ilaria Morali reflects on recent attempts by practitioners to reconfigure this discipline. She points out that the “theology of religions” is a recent (indeed a twentieth-century) addition to the theological fold, though the Church has always sought to understand its relationship to other traditions. Roman Catholicism’s self-understanding is shaped by the conviction that the Church plays a mediatory role in the process of salvation, a role that it does not accord to other traditions as such. That being said, the Church has not been indifferent to the call for a reconsideration of how the specificity of the Christian message can be made plausible in a world where the religious other is ever more present and the “spiritual and moral goods” manifest in their lives and traditions demand a more credible account than that provided by the theology of another age. While keenly aware of the need for a consideration of particular religions in all their complexity, Morali is insistent that a “theology of religions” cannot be developed without explicit reference to the revelation which is given in Christ and finds expression in the Church’s doctrinal tradition. For that reason, she argues that the original notion of the “theology of religions” (albeit imperfect) is a more appropriate description of the Church’s engagement with the religious other than many recent coinages, including “theology of interreligious dialogue,” which employ the word “theology” without due regard for its Christian specificity.

THE APPEAL TO (RELIGIOUS) EXPERIENCE AND THE THEOLOGY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The appeal to “experience,” in any domain, but particularly in theology, is fraught with difficulties. These include the question of whose experience is being invoked, how we can gain adequate access to it, whether it can be articulated and made accessible to others, and to what degree alleged “personal” experience is the fruit of social and ideological manipulation. In the case of theology, a discipline rooted in communal “tradition,” both biblical and doctrinal, the appeal to experience smacks of subjectivism and perhaps even hubris. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the attempt to introduce the category into Catholic theology produced an institutional backlash which led to the banishment and silencing of some of the most fertile minds of the age.

Contemporary theology and philosophy acknowledge that there is no experience without interpretation, which means there is no experience outside of particular traditions of discourse. Religions, with their sacred texts, rituals, and codes of conduct, may be numbered among such traditions but they are no less susceptible than others to the novelty, both in terms of questions asked and experience generated, which they may provoke among