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Dialogue, Difference and the Third Space of Religions

Arguments for a New Understanding of
Religion and Culture

We have come together here to celebrate the 6th interreligious dialogue between Indonesia and Austria. I think this is an excellent opportunity to think about what dialogue really means. First of all, a real dialogue is much more than a sum of statements and monologues, although this mode of communication may be – from a diplomatic point of view – helpful and necessary. We are sitting here together because we are interested in a peaceful way of living together – on an individual, but also on a collective intercultural level.

To some extent, dialogue is the opposite of violence. It contains an element of alterity. It is the other that widens the horizon, posing questions and giving answers. *I put a spell in you.* The dialogue enriches me, making it possible to see me from the outside and for me to learn more about the other side. There is a productive and risky element in dialogue. It is sure that it will change me.

Dialogue is much more than a cultural technique and an instrument. At the same time, it is important to say that it is also an instrument and a technique that goes hand in hand with the ideas of human rights and efforts to find compromise between different interests, ideologies and religions. It is also quite evident that in this kind of dialogue the power aspect plays a certain role. Hence compromise is the unavoidable consequence of such pragmatic talks and exchanges. In the German language the words for trade, *Handel*, and negotiating, *Verhandeln*, share the same etymological root.

An interfaith and intercultural dialogue is something else. It has a utopian aspect. It is not only religious or interreligious on account of its topics, but also on account of its structure. It is no coincidence that the deepest reflections on the topic of dialogue in the Occidental culture come from thinkers with a religious background, such as Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Dialogue in this spiritual sense has a religious structure. It is connected with the figure of the other, of an agency that transcends me and is the horizon of my existence. As God, this figure of the other cannot be fixed or possessed; s/he is present in his or her absence. In this sense, the other is as immanent as transcendent. This other always comes before me, it calls me and it looks at me. His or her manifestation is the voice or the countenance. Answering the other is one of the central conditions of our existence.

Because of its structure, dialogue in this deeper sense creates specific values that can fit together with religious beliefs: respect, peace (as long as we talk together we may make use

of symbolic but not real weapons), modesty, 'tolerance', human rights, democratic procedures (every participant is allowed to have her or his word).

What I call the alteritarian aspect of dialogue does not imply automatically that all people, in realising the experience of alterity and participating in a dialogue, are automatically religious in that sense that they belong to a certain religious house, a church, a synagogue, a Buddhist or Hindu temple, or a mosque. In my view, this is already an act of interpretation of such an experience.

Dialogue takes place because we are different: if we were not different, dialogue would not make any sense. Analogously, one can say that every culture, every form of religion, and every systematic world view is confronted with the phenomenon of the other. Thus the 'inter' in interfaith and intercultural relations is nothing that goes beyond our culture, our beliefs and our religion. From the very beginning, it is part of our culture and our faith.

One could say that dialogue plays a very important role in the holy books of all world religions: all the prophets, holy men, angels, and sometimes God raise the word and talk to human beings. But there is another dialogic aspect in many religions. For example, Judaism, Christianity and Islam in all their variations are related to each other. They have a dialogic structure; they are, to speak with Michail Bakhtin, in an inter-textual relationship. This is also true with regard to the mystical dimension of religion. Apparently, mystics from different religious traditions have the impression that they are talking about the same deep experience, which is inexpressible. By the way, I don't think that the differentiation between a more or less primitive polytheism and a progressive monotheism – which at least since the 19th century has played an important role – is any longer current or acceptable. All the so-called polytheistic religions have a unifying element (such as Brahma), and conversely, all monotheistic religions have a cluster of various religious figures and myths.

Religion can be observed from an internal and from an external perspective. For me, both focalisations are legitimate. As far as I can see, religion is not a simple, but a complex issue. It is a composite that contains different elements such as

1. mystic and spiritual feelings that are individual and collective at the same time,
2. a narrative element (myths) that creates a collective narrative identity,
3. a discursive part with a more or less consistent system of beliefs and ethic values,

4. a setting of rites and rituals including sacrifices.

These four elements have been worked out by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead in his famous book “The Making of Religion”. I would add two other ones:

5. a form of organisation and institutionalisation that positions people within the religious community (the power aspect, hierarchy, exclusions and inclusions, the place in society, culture and politics)

These elements are not separated from each other, but fit together. One is not higher and better than the other. Religions may differ in integrating and accentuating these different elements into the composite called *religion*. From a cultural perspective, religion in a broad sense (including secular ideologies) can be seen, as T. S. Eliot has pointed out,

6. as the kernel and the program of culture creating meaning, identity, tradition and collective memory. By the way, it is obvious that programmatic intentions and the realities of everyday life never fit together one hundred percent.

Looking at these six different elements, it soon becomes clear that some of them are harmless with regard to the question of dialogue and of violence. I have never heard of mystics playing an important role in religious wars. Narratives, as such, also do not stimulate a readiness for violence, as long as they are not connected with a strongly dogmatic issue. Rites are more problematic, because they suggest a system of exclusion: firstly, a separation from all the others outside my religion who are not allowed to participate in the rituals, and secondly, segregation within the community by excluding women or young people, for example, from central aspect of ritual practice. The same is true with regard to the aspect of organisation, which is decisive for the question: Who has a central place and a voice in the religious community? I think that it is an immense problem for the Catholic Church of our times to legitimate why it excludes women from central functions. And it is also important how strictly a religious community organizes borders and barriers to their religious neighbours. Moreover, every community is part of the power system in its country, and thus responsible for the way this system makes use of its symbolic and real power.

Bearing these factors in mind, it is nonetheless quite evident that the discursive part of religion, the setting of explicit beliefs and values, is the strongest and at the same time most problematic aspect of religion. Not only does every claim to absolute truth separate my side

from the other – this seems unavoidable: it also creates a feeling of superiority that threatens to undermine, or at least reduce, my respect for other religions. The history of Christianity – to mention my own religious background – is full of such negative examples.

Can religion set aside its claim to absolute truth, which could be seen as *the* constitutive statement around which most religions were traditionally built? Or can we now accept that all religions refer to a single divinity, and thus must be understood as different languages referring to the same thing?

In my view, Western European societies are not anti-religious. What they try to do is to restrict the power of religion in civil society. Historically speaking, this is the result of the outbreak of violence in the religious wars typifying the early modern period in Europe. The separation of state and religion, and the establishment of a system of division of powers, is the ambitious attempt to ban civil and religious wars from our societies in favour of a peaceful agonistic pluralism, in which different religious and non-religious camps have their voice. It denies every kind of a symbolic monopoly in society. Every person can live out his or her own religion as long as this does not impair other people. Thus, one could say, civil societies, especially in Europe, are based on dialogue and diversity.

Returning to the phenomenon of dialogue, one may argue that under the conditions of modernity, dialogue happens not only inside every single religion, but also in the sphere of the *inter*. Let me say something about this temporal and spatial 'inter-sphere'. Quite clearly, it is something like a third space between at least two actors or groups. Maybe it is unstable. It is not identical with the structure of the single religious community of each participant. The dialogue seems to be at the margins. But the margins are not, as the word suggests, marginal: they define the quality of our symbolic realms. They constitute how our symbolic realms and how the various 'houses of religion' actually work. Margins and borders are the decisive contact zones in which dialogue becomes possible. They determine our relationship to all the others.

It is the Indian theoretician Homi K. Bhabha who has worked out this concept within the framework of post-colonial studies. In his thinking the *third space* is seen as a meeting point between various cultures, a place of encounter and negotiation with overlapping identities. Bhabha's examples are related to the situation of the immigrant of our days in the Western world, but also to the encounter in post-colonial constellations between colonisers and

colonised. The delicate problem of mission also plays a certain role here. Bhabha's third space is not identical with the situation of interreligious dialogue, but there are some similarities relating to the meaning of the preposition 'inter'. It means that you are not here and you are not there. You are on the way, or on a way. Whether an interreligious dialogue can be a place of reciprocal cultural transfer, or of cultural and religious exchange, is in my view an open question. But it is evident that this dialogue is an intensive event with the logic of continuity; in contrast, the situation of the migrant is more or less one on the long run. As long as one stays in a foreign country, one is confronted with the question of how to place one's beliefs, convictions and way of life in another strange cultural context.

Dialogue as a central element in culture is not a fix state, but a process. We were and we are changed by dialogue – on an individual level by our loved ones and our friends, in everyday life. Dialogue has already changed Muslims and Christians in the last centuries, positively but maybe also negatively. Against all religious fundamentalism and radicalism, one can say that all religions and beliefs in a broader sense need forms of repetition that allow for both variation and change. It is not possible to preserve religions in a certain state. Whether we want them to or not, they undergo transformations and new interpretations with regard to a new context, a new generation. If religion is part of the varying program of a culture, these changes go hand in hand with cultural ones which are based on three central elements: the shift between generations, inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and symbolic exchange, and on the 'material' level media transformations.

Not speaking with each other, by the way, is also a form of communication, a very risky one. It is impossible not to communicate (Paul Watzlawick). It is probable that our dialogues will change some aspect our beliefs, our convictions and our images of the other religions and religious traditions. Religions entail a strong claim to be true, with this making them both attractive and problematic. Can we, in an interreligious dialogue, arrive at the point that German Protestant and Romantic Friedrich Schleiermacher had in mind when he suggested that all religions make an important contribution to religiosity? And that religion is never proud, but always humble?

We are accustomed to argue that diversity is a high value, for example with regard to languages, cultures and so-called internal sub-cultures, and also in an ecological sense. And how do these values fit together with our religious and cultural traditions?

Religions have a strong symbolic power, influencing our way of life and our ethics, and this also applies to people outside a certain house of religion. All 'world religions' are confronted with the fact that modern science and technology have radically changed our life in a way that was inconceivable for our predecessors. I only mention some of these various aspects:

- the possibility of self-manipulation and intervention in our physical nature, which to some degree makes us self-creators,
- the huge dimension of the known universe, which makes us lonesome inhabitants of a tiny planet in a huge nowhere land,
- the radical change in the relationship between the sexes, and also between the generations, as well as the consequences of global industrialisation and digitisation.

Culture is a complex word, and this is also true of *religion*. T. S. Eliot maintained that culture and religion are two sides of the same coin. With regard to our shared topic, interfaith talks and inter-religious dialogue, I would like to present one approach to the understanding of culture. It goes back to the German philosopher and cultural theoretician Georg Simmel, the co-founder of modern sociology. Writing tiny essays about seemingly unimportant things like door, bridge, window and frame, he was a master of the small form. Re-reading these inspiring texts, it soon becomes clear how these seemingly banal things are of central importance.

The bridge is, quite clearly, an element connecting two separate entities, and it has long been a metaphor for dialogue. But the precondition of a bridge's existence is that there is some separation: without separation, no connection. There is no choice.

The functionality of the door is trickier. A house without a door is for its inhabitants a prison and for people from outside an insuperable obstacle. But a house that is always open is also dysfunctional, because it neglects our need for a space to ourselves. Encounters between humans, men and women, can only be realised if there are borders, in other words the possibility of closing the doors. Closing and opening doors, connecting and separating, are two aspects that belong together and describe the work of culture and of religion.

Furthermore, it is important to say that, as Simmel has pointed out, it is not the visible border that determines this process. It is the invisible border that becomes explicit in certain situations and circumstances. So bordering is an unavoidable phenomenon central to all culture. The window is a very sophisticated phenomenon, seemingly making it possible to be inside and outside at the same time. This is why the window became the model for all

modern and post-modern media. That the most successful operating system uses this name for all those media which combine real inside with virtual outside is an impressive confirmation of this thesis.

The frame of a painting, for example, also establishes a very important border. It creates the artist's own space, within which he or she can work. Every space is defined by doors, bridges, frames, fences, windows, membranes and others techniques of opening and closing, connecting and separating up and down, inside and outside, here and beyond. Thus it follows that in inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue we can decide about the mechanisms of opening and closing. Dialogue, I think, is the agreed-upon frame of inter-religious communication.

And yet there is also a temporal aspect of dialogue and culture, and I would like to say some words about it. There is the present, there is the past, and there is the future. We come together here in October 2017, but this is not the first encounter between representatives of various religions in Indonesia and in Austria. There are painful experiences, traumata, religious confrontation, the past. To come together means that there is a kind of willingness to forgive and start anew. Every dialogue gives us a credit. Credit is a necessary precondition for an intensive dialogue. There must be some sort of trust, without which we cannot start. One goal of such a dialogue could be to strengthen this reciprocal trust with the hope of making a small contribution to peace in our countries, and in the world.

For such a project, an inter-religious dialogue, this is an enormous challenge. At the 5th meeting, I presented a paper about religion and violence, in which I also tried to explain to our friends from Indonesia that the separation between religion and state in nearly all European countries came as a reaction to the bloody civil wars that took place in the name of religious truths. Some observers in the West compare the wars in Middle East with the Thirty Years' War in Central Europe in the 17th century. Interreligious dialogue can be seen as an alternative to the tragic dimension of violence in Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan that we have witnessed for years. With regard to religious radicalisation in our countries, we may ask if dialogue can be an attractive answer to a mindset that is aimed at the destruction of anything that is or seems to be different in the name of a pseudo-religious identity that has never existed before, neither in your nor in our country. Its language is not one of dialogue, but of hatred.

Living in dialogue does not necessarily or automatically establish a kind of relativism in the sense of disorientation, but an orientation to the dialogue as such. In such an understanding, inter-religious dialogue is relational; that means it develops relationships to the other and to others, individuals and groups. It includes a capacity for social and cultural imagination, a sensitivity that allows you to look at the world through the eyes of your counterpart. In coming to a close, I repeat a statement made by Michel de Montaigne, the famous author of the “Essais”, who worked as a peacemaker in the brutal religious war in France, arguing that it is contingent for him to be a Christian. But the next sentence is decisive, namely, that he accepts this contingency.

I would like to finish my lecture with a quote from an artist, my wife Sabine Müller-Funk, who worked for a couple of months together with Iranian artists in Tehran. She makes use of the concept of the membrane, which simultaneously has an aspect of opening and an aspect of closing. This could be seen as a model for dialogue in religion and culture. She describes her 2011 installation *Tehran Membranes* in the following sentence:

Through the membrane of your words, I am looking at you – through the membrane of my view, I am walking into the world. (www.sabine.mueller-funk.com)

