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Concepts and Practice of interreligious and socio-religious dialogue.

Abstract:

This contribution distinguishes between inter-religious and socio-religious dialogues. *Interreligious* dialogues are encounters between members of religious communities. Even if they don't speak about religious issues in a strict sense they speak from different *religious* angles. In *socio-religious* dialogues, however, representatives of religious communities (who are also citizens) speak with politicians, with representatives of civil society or simply with their nonreligious co-citizens. The following reflections mainly focus on such *socio-religious* dialogues. They consider the relevance of the place where that dialogue is conducted, the agents who are involved in it, and the forms in which it occurs, and provide many examples of such religious dialogues in the public sphere.

Key-words: interreligious dialogue, socio-religious dialogue, levels, places, agents, forms of religious dialogues, 'dialogue of life'.

The *kairos* of 'dialogue' as a model of interreligious relationships seems to be over, and voices critical of this model are becoming stronger and stronger. These voices are raised from both *within* and *without* religious communities. The objections from *within* express the concern that interreligious dialogue weakens loyalty towards one's own religion. The more one opens up towards other forms of faith and belief the more one's own faith and beliefs are relativized. The missionary impetus fades, and the differences between the religious traditions seem not to be taken seriously. Objections from *without* emphasize the 'dark' side of religion and its potential to create or at least legitimize violence, oppression, and intolerance. Interreligious dialogue is seen to be a naive window dressing which allows the participants to present an ideal image of their religion, glossing over problematic issues and whitewashing all the trouble religions cause. Especially following the terror attacks on 9/11 and similar events dialogue between Christians and Muslims – and interreligious dialogue in general – became suspect, and was seen as a means of deceiving civil society about the 'true' nature of Islam and of religion in general.

In my 2005 book 'Ende des Dialogs?' ('The End of Dialogue?') I highlighted this shift and argued that the increasingly critical perception of religion does not devalue the dialogue model. On the contrary, the appearances of 'dark' sides of religions make dialogical relations

between representatives of religions and civil society all the more necessary. What is needed is a dialogue not only between adherents of different religions but also between religious and secular players in the public sphere. An adequate reaction to this shift should be not to reduce such dialogues but to broaden *inter-religious* dialogue and achieve *socio-religious* dialogue.

In *interreligious* dialogues every participant is affiliated to his/her religious community. He/she belongs to one side, and the parties represent different traditions and communities. Their dialogue need not be restricted to religious issues in a strict sense but can also deal with common ethical, political and social problems. However, the parties speak from different *religious* angles.

In *socio-religious* dialogues, by contrast, the religious participants belong to both sides, because they are also members of civil society. As members both of their own religious community and of society they speak with secular representatives of this society. They speak about their manifold contributions to society and the problems that arise from living in this society. Such a dialogue will probably be less intellectual and more practical. In particular, religious groups who are a minority in society may have a high interest in articulating their experiences and their demands. However, representatives of society also have an interest in such a dialogue, since it contributes to peaceful coexistence in a religiously plural society. It helps to cope with conflicts, prevent clashes between different cultural and religious groups and foster the cohesion of society.

In the following reflections I will focus predominantly on this *socio-religious* dialogue and relate it to *interreligious* dialogue. Combining the two, I will use the term *religious dialogue*.

1. Different levels of religious dialogue and their relation to the public sphere

Encounters with adherents of religions can be located on different levels, follow different agendas, and pursue different aims. Roughly, one can distinguish three levels:

(a) On the *practical* level there are issues at stake which refer to the praxis of religious life in society, for example: Is a Muslim community allowed to build a mosque in the center of a particular city? Should a Christian migrant church be permitted to celebrate a festival on a public square? Where can Jews and Muslims practice kosher and halal slaughter? Which religious events are announced in communal media? And so on. Alongside such specific religious issues are also questions of local politics, which might affect the interests of religious communities, for example: How can the public transportation system become organized in a way that does

justice to those neighborhoods which are inhabited mostly by migrants, thus allowing them to participate in the public life of the city as much as possible.

 (b) On the *communicative* level, the dialogical encounter aims at fostering mutual understanding, reducing misconceptions and prejudices, creating respectful interpersonal relations and trust in the 'other'. On this level, the improvement of personal relations is more important than the achievement of solutions for practical problems. It could be said to be more a hermeneutical than an instrumental dialogue. Therefore, it does not aim at reaching a consensus for which differences have to be overcome, but aims at understanding these differences: the different self-understandings, world-views and life-orientations of the partners. Dialogue on the communicative level seeks to exercise a change of perspectives. The partners are requested to adopt the perspective of others and to look through their eyes. This presupposes an interest in the person and in the religion of the other. In the long run, respectful personal relations between adherents of different religious communities will also have practical effects on the coexistence of religious communities in society, on the constructive participation of these communities in society, and thus on the social coherence of society itself.

In his response to the Islamic letter 'A Common Word between Us and You', Catholicos Aram I. of Cilicia (2008), the former Moderator of the Central and Executive Committees of the WCC, says: 'Relationship, reciprocity and accountability build community. Sharing life together implies building community. Human beings cannot live without community. As an expression of love towards God and towards neighbor, community building has been central to both Muslim and Christian teachings and ways of life. We firmly believe, as we have stated on different occasions in ecumenical meetings, that a strong commitment to living together would help us to destroy the walls of prejudice, reassert that each religion has integrity, and generate mutual accountability and common responsibility.'

 (c) On the *spiritual* and *theological* level, the encounter between different faiths, but also between religious and secular worldviews, can lead to mutual inspiration, which brings forth deeper insights into one's own theological understanding and perhaps new impulses for the spiritual life of the participants. Some proponents of interreligious dialogue even go beyond such expectation of mutual enrichment and declare interreligious theological dialogue to be a common search for truth. This position presupposes that one regards various religions as different paths to the same transcendent ground of being, as proponents of the so-called 'pluralist model', like Perry Schmidt-Leukel, do. In his contribution he regards common truth-seeking as

the deepest purpose of interreligious dialogue. In doing so, he emphasizes the intellectual dimension of interreligious dialogue. Moreover, in requesting that religious dialogue-partners resist being instrumentalized by non-religious players in society, he raises a critical question for socio-religious dialogue: He warns against the 'danger of being hijacked or overwhelmed by the strong and powerful forces of the public sphere'.[1]

While not himself a 'pluralist' who sees *one* truth behind all (authentic) religions, but rather an 'inclusivist' who regards the different conceptions of divine truth in various religious traditions as irreducible, in a statement issued in 2003, Catholicos Aram I. came close to this position. The statement reads: 'Dialogue is a search for truth. All religions are, in a sense, bearers of truth but in different ways, and each religion has its own perceptions and claims of truth. Dialogue gives a religion the sense of being incomplete without the other. This does not imply a lack of fullness or deficiency. Dialogue is a learning-and-listening process. It may lead to the discovery of new dimensions of truth. It may also challenge a religion to redefine and reaffirm the truth it holds.'(Aram I, 2003)

The third level of religious dialogue will become particularly relevant in interreligious dialogues, while socio-religious dialogues will focus predominantly on the first and the second level. However, faith, beliefs, spirituality and theology will work on the mental 'backstage' of every religious participant, no matter which level the dialogue is located on. Even if only practical issues are dealt with, religious motives are at work. They shape the motivations behind engaging in such an encounter, the ways in which it is conducted, and the positions which are held by the participants. Thus, even in a socio-religious dialogue, theological positions and reflections play an important role for religious participants.

2. Interfaces between religious dialogues and the public sphere

There are different interfaces between religious dialogues and the public sphere, referring to the places/settings, the actors/participants, the forms/agendas.

(a) In regard to the *place* where religious (inter-religious and socio-religious) dialogue takes place, one can ask whether and how the public sphere is involved. Religious dialogues can be public, semi-public, or non-public. Normally, they are a public event, accessible to everybody

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[1] As he states in his contribution to this volume.

who is interested in it. The public sphere is the forum where it takes place. Some of these meetings, however, are semi-public, where only invited guests are allowed to participate. This is the case in many 'councils of religions' or 'interreligious round-tables'. When crucial questions are debated the public may be excluded, so that the meeting is non-public. When, for example, the mayor of a city receives a delegation from a Muslim community who intends to build a mosque there, this will probably be a non-public meeting.

It makes a difference whether the encounter takes place in a room which belongs to a religious community or in a 'neutral' room, for example, an assembly-hall owned by the city. The owner of the forum influences what goes on in it. By providing the setting he/she exercises an invisible power, even if he/she shares this power with representatives of the 'other' group. In a literal sense of the word, he/she plays a 'key'-role.

In July 2013 a large international interreligious conference was held in Graz (Austria), organized by the city administration. It aimed to contribute to an improvement in relations between the different faith communities in Graz, in Austria, and in Europe. About 150 representatives from different religious communities, academic theologians, and experts from various fields of religious studies came together to discuss crucial issues related to the presence of religions in the public sphere.

Some discussions were held in the city-hall and in a conference center, while others took place in religious sites (churches, mosques, synagogues) and in the halls of the religions communities. It became obvious that the place the event took place and the setting of the scene have an impact on the meeting. The unwritten rules of the place affected not so much the contents of the talks and discussions but the style in which they were held. Even if the speaker in the synagogue was a Christian theologian, the event was 'Jewish'.

In the local setting of dialogues, *structural* power is at work, and this also has to be taken into account in understanding religious encounters. In the encounter itself – as far as it is a talk – there is also *discursive* power at work. Foucault's discourse-analysis-approach is highly relevant for a theory of religious dialogue. It relates the exercise of power neither to single agents and actions of coercion or domination nor to social structures (Foucault, 1998, 63). A discourse is an organized and normatively regulated body of knowledge which governs ways of thinking, communication and (social) action. In discourses, power is enacted through the implicit or explicit use of knowledge, in a diffuse, dispersed and pervasive rather than concentrated way. Instead of being deployed by agents, discourse constitutes agents and the 'objects' of which they speak. It constitutes the way reality is perceived and experienced – including religious

interpretations of reality. The traditions of religions can be seen as long-enduring discourses, which are, as all discourses are, sources, instruments and effects of a power that is embedded in them and permanently negotiated among the participants.

'Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true'(Foucault, 1980, 131).

This explains why a religious encounter which takes place in an Islamic country will have a different shape to an encounter with the same participants and on the same topics in a European country, and why a meeting in a city-hall, organized by the city administration, will be shaped differently to the 'same' meeting held in a mosque, organized by a Muslim community: the discursive practice of language and the norms of stating, defending or rejecting truth are different. The 'social script' is different.

(b) In regard to the *agents* of religious (inter-religious and socio-religious) dialogue one can ask whether the organizers, the active participants, and the attending audience of a specific event represent religious communities or civil society. Various combinations are possible: the meeting can be organized by a secular institution as an interreligious dialogue. It can be organized by a religious community as a socio-religious dialogue. It can be addressed to the members of one's own community or to the general public, and so on.

Many city governments are engaged in bringing together religious communities, in order to create respectful and peaceful relations between them on a local level. I provide two different examples of public agency in interreligious dialogues:

On September 10, 2005, in St. Gallen (Switzerland), the 'St. Gallen Declaration for the Coexistence of Religions and Interreligious Dialogue' was signed by representatives of the Canton and of the City on the one hand and by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformed Church and the association of Muslim communities on the other hand. Meanwhile other religious and political leaders also signed.

This declaration contains five commitments which seek to foster a peaceful coexistence of the religious communities in society. Here I highlight the fourth commitment: 'We let ourselves be guided by the principle that differences among people exist and need to be addressed, but that they are relative. We are all God's creatures. We therefore support a culture of diversity. We want to strive for our religious and cultural identity, not in defending ourselves by isolating or

excluding others, but by introducing this in a dialogue of coexistence. We are committed to a diverse society, which seeks integration and is based on fundamental humanitarian values and a democratic constitutional state.'

The declaration was inaugurated by politicians and aimed to launch a process of interreligious and socio-religious dialogues, in order to create dialogical relations which sought to enrich religious communities and society as a whole. Many events were organized and conducted to promote this process, most of them as part of the 'Interreligiöse Dialog- und Aktionswoche' (IDA), an annual week of interreligious talks and common actions. The whole project is an interreligious dialogue in the framework of socio-religious dialogue.

Another example of interreligious dialogue in the public sphere involving the participation of political leaders is the 'Birmingham Council of Faiths'. The history of this grass-roots organization started as early as November 1974 as the fruit of socio-political activities seeking to promote racial justice in districts of Birmingham where many migrants lived. Today, nine religious groups are members of the council: representatives of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Baha'i, Zoroastrianism and Jainism. Other groups are also affiliated. Besides promoting mutual understanding, the council cooperates with the city administration in solving social problems which arise for the religious communities. The city council supported the activity of the faiths council, not through financial gratuity but through parallel initiatives such as 'Faiths Round Tables' and through the readiness of the Lord Mayors to act as its Honorary Presidents. The council understands its task as raising a public voice on behalf of the religious communities. Not only do they practice an interreligious dialogue in the public sphere, they also act in this public sphere, in order to promote their interests and in this way to help foster the social climate in the city in a constructive way.[2]

(c) With regards to the *forms* of religious (inter-religious and socio-religious) dialogue the question can be raised as to which settings foster or hinder public participation. This depends not only on the place where the event takes place but also on the form chosen for its performance.

The scene of a 'standard' *interreligious* dialogue is a smaller or bigger meeting of representatives of religious organizations and experts to which participants are invited by a religious or secular organization. It is centred on an *intellectual* exchange of information, perceptions and attitudes related to the religious tradition of the partners. Active and passive participation in it requires a certain knowledge of the topics discussed and of the religious traditions involved.

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[2] https://bhamfaiths.org.uk/ (website accessed Dec 31, 2016).

The de facto condition for participation is a particular intellectual standard, and the meeting aims at widening the intellectual horizon of the participants. Therefore, it is a kind of (mutual) religious education.

The intellectual level may be higher or lower. When the Reformed pastor in a parish near Basel (Switzerland) invited the entire Muslim community in the suburb to his church, in order to give them some information about the church, the worship-service, the parish and so on, the intellectual standard cannot be very high. Nevertheless it is an encounter that addresses, above all, the intellect of the visitors. Of course, such an encounter can and may affect also emotional aspects of perception and understanding. It may be motivated by the intention to create a comprehensive experience of encounter, which helps to build bridges of understanding, respect, harmony, and friendship among religious communities. However, the main means of reaching this aim is intellectual communication.

In recent years and decades other forms of interreligious encounter in the public sphere have been given increased attention and sometimes even priority: those which focus more on a 'dialogue of life' and those which prefer aesthetic expressions over intellectual exchange.

'Dialogue of life' means getting together in ordinary situations of daily life, talking with each other, eating, visiting places of interest, playing sports or playing or working together on common projects, rather than gathering in conferences. Dialogue here is not a particular event of discussion, but a style of interaction. It aims, above all, not at gaining knowledge but at creating better relationships and gaining insights into the way adherents of others' religions live. It aims at becoming familiar with the spiritual resources that provide them with existential energy, ethical orientation and eschatological hope. From which (re-)sources do they feed their souls in coping with their life and in giving meaning to it?

The 'New World Encyclopedia' summarizes the purpose of 'dialogue of life' as follows: 'Wherever people live alongside those who believe and practice different things, there is the possibility of learning from them through everyday encounters and, when friendship grows, people share each other's religious festivals and rites of passage.'[3]

Unlike intellectual dialogue, which has a distinct topic – be it theological or society-related – 'dialogue of life' is not a 'dialogue' in the strict sense. It does not have a specific theme and does not aim at convincing the other or even at reaching agreement. It is a form of community-

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[3]http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Inter-religious_Dialogue#Interreligious_dialogue_for_the_new_millennium (website accessed on January 1, 2017).

building communication and interaction, in which religious beliefs play a less important role. More important is the willingness and openness of the participants to engage in such a common project. This does not mean that talking about religious beliefs is ruled out of the interaction. It is a hoped-for side-effect but not the main purpose of the encounter.

'Dialogue of life' becomes especially important when social tensions rise. It can be a means of peace-building and peace-keeping between different religious groups. As one of many examples, I refer to the work of the 'Inter Faith Mediation Committee' (IFMC) in Liberia, which was founded in 1989 as a collaborative alliance between the 'Liberian Christian Council' and the 'National Muslim Council of Liberia' and was developed further as the 'Inter-Religious Council of Liberia' (IRCL, 1995). In the lengthy period of political instability after the military coup in 1980, the IFMC inaugurated many peace-building-initiatives. Some were directed towards the political leaders, others tried to establish a 'dialogue of life' on the grass-roots level. These institutions helped enormously in mediating and transforming the conflict in the 1990s, with elections being held in 1997. Christians and Muslims collaborated in striving for peace and reconciliation. The IFMC mitigated the conflict by spreading the insight that it was not primarily a religious conflict but, on the contrary, occurred *against* the convictions and ethical imperatives of the religions concerned. It also created an atmosphere of constructive communication among religious people: a 'dialogue of life' (Maundi, 2006, 103-122).[4]

In sum, 'dialogue of life' is not to be understood merely as a single event or a series of events but as a comprehensive effort to create dialogical relationships between religious communities and society. Religious education plays an important role in this effort, as it creates the cultural soil out of which dialogical relations can grow. In a multi-religious country, children should learn from early age to respect the religious heritage of the various traditions and to tolerate adherents of other faiths.

It is important that children are not only taught about Islam as a system of beliefs, rules and practices but that they also get in touch with Muslim children, so that they learn not only on a cognitive but also on an affective level. Through such encounters on a personal level empathy and goodwill can sprout. This is the most important prerequisite of dialogical relations with adherents of other faiths, and this dialogical attitude has to be instilled into the personality of a child as early as possible.

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[4]For more information see: https://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/liberia/peacebuilding-organisations/inter-religious-council-of-liberia/ (website accessed on January 1, 2017)

The other alternative to an intellectual (inter-) religious dialogue is the participation in *aesthetic* appearances of other religions, for example, in musical performances. There are many projects which invite musicians of different religious traditions to play together, be it in one orchestra – like Daniel Barenboim's 'West-Eastern Divan Orchestra' – or in a festival of sacred music – like the 'Musica sacra International' festival in Marktoberdorf (Germany).

The 'West-Eastern Divan Orchestra' was founded in Weimar in 1999 by Daniel Barenboim and Edward W. Said. The name refers to Goethe's 'West-Eastern Divan', in which he expresses his admiration for the 14th century Persian poet Hafiz and for Islamic culture in general. The purpose is to bring together Jewish and Palestinian musicians. In order to train musicians from Near Eastern countries, Barenboim founded a music academy ('Barenboim-Said Academy', BSA) in Berlin in 2012. The Daniel-Barenboim-Foundation also supports many other music-related projects in Israel and Palestine, such as the 'Barenboim-Said Music Centre' in Ramallah.[5]

One can question whether this is a project of (inter-) religious dialogue at all. Religion seems to play no role or only a marginal role in it. The works of music played and performed by the orchestra are not specifically religious but (largely) 'secular'. The participants, however, are clearly shaped by their respective religious traditions and communities. Thus, in an indirect and discrete way, the project promotes interreligious understanding, even if this is not its explicitly declared purpose. It does so not only by bringing the musicians together but also by means of public concerts which can be seen as symbolic acts. The music becomes the medium of the message that transethnic, transpolitical, transcultural and transreligious reconciliation and co-operation is possible.

'Musica sacra International' was founded in 1992 by Gustav Adolf Rabus, the director of the Bavarian music-academy in Marktoberdorf. Since then the festival has taken place every second year in spring (at Pentecost). In 2014 the General Secretary of the WCC, Olaf Fykse Tveit, took over the patronage, and he was succeeded in 2016 by Norbert Lammert, the President of the German parliament. During the five-day event, public concerts of religious music are given by more than ten ensembles – mostly choirs – from different cultures and religions. Some take place in churches, one in a mosque, and others in secular halls. In one concert at least two

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[5] For more information see: http://www.daniel-barenboim-stiftung.org/ (website accessed on January 1, 2017).

different ensembles enter the stage. The choirs also perform at Pentecost services in Protestant and Roman Catholic churches.[6]

The organizers understand the festival as a new form of interreligious dialogue. Spiritual music serves as a medium for fostering an encounter of religious commitments. However, does listening to the vocals of other religious traditions opens the audience's heart to their adherents? Does it have a transforming effect, or is it merely folkloristic entertainment? The impression it has on the singers is certainly strong, but this is probably due not to the music itself but to personal encounters with singers of other religions and with their hosts. The music is the medium. It brings people together. In some cases, it may affect the hearts and souls of those who listen to it, but this might not have a sustainable effect on the way they understand and practice interreligious relations.

3. Conclusion

In this contribution I sought to focus on different concepts and practical attempts to implement inter-religious and socio-religious dialogue in the public sphere. The underlying assumption was that such attempts are urgently needed.

The relevance of religious (inter-religious and socio-religious) dialogue in the public sphere is especially obvious with relation to Islam and Muslims in Western societies. Here, socio-religious dialogue seems to be even more important than inter-religious dialogue. Negative attitudes against Islam are widespread, not so much in the churches, where the dialogue-activities during recent centuries have borne fruit and contributed to the creation of networks of respectful communication, but in public opinion and in the mainstream media. In 2014, 57% of the German population regarded Islam as dangerous and as a threat.[7] Following the recent terror attacks committed by radical Islamists in European cities the numbers are even higher. Jews in Germany feel particularly threatened by the growing number of Muslims. Simultaneously, Muslims feel stigmatized and disrespected, since Islam has become increasingly associated with violence

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[6] For more information see: http://www.chorverbaende.de/de/modfestivals/musica-sacra-international.html (website accessed on January 1, 2017).

[7] This was the result of a survey conducted by the opinion research institute TNS Emnid and sponsored by the Bertelsmann-Foundation: www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/51_Religionsmonitor/Zusammenfassung_der_Sonderauswertung.pdf (website accessed on January 1, 2017).

and terrorism. To prevent a disintegration of society such trends need to be faced and counter-acted. Dialogue between religious groups and between them and civil society is of crucial importance.

In other parts of the world which are disrupted by religious conflicts the relevance of inter-religious and socio-religious dialogue is even more evident than in the (mostly) secularized societies of central Europe. Inter-religious and socio-religious dialogues are important elements of peace-building endeavors. 'Dialogue' is especially effective when it goes beyond mere talking with each other and includes practical cooperation.

The necessity of relating to people of other faiths in a dialogical way as a condition for peace in the world is stressed by Pope Francis in his 'Apostolic Exhortation', in which he states: 'An attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions, in spite of various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides. Inter-religious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities' (Pope Francis, 2013, § 250)

In a similar way, voices from the political arena stress the necessity and importance of inter-religious and socio-religious dialogue for peace and for a just economic development. On March 27, 2015 a consultation on the 'Relevance of Interreligious and Inter-Civilizational Dialogue to the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals' was held at the United Nations Head-quarter in New York City. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, the United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, stated: 'Both Universal Peace Federation and the UN Alliance of Civilizations share the belief that the promotion of intercultural and interfaith dialogue is the path for people and nations to live in peace and security.'(Pople, 2015)

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