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**Interfaith Dialogue and Comparative Theology:  
A Theoretical Approach to a Practical Dilemma**

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*Interfaith dialogue is based on the premise that there is more that unites than divides us. Epistemological humility, acceptance of religious plurality or the need for unity itself have all been presented as unifying pathways across disparate religious traditions. Despite such approaches, conceptual understandings of interfaith dialogue have not kept pace with practice. This theoretical paper argues that interfaith dialogical theory profits from a deep understanding of moral psychology and social learning theory. The former posits that a sense of 'fairness' and 'universal care' are aligned with religious acceptance. On the other hand, values of sanctity, loyalty and authority promote a sense of religious conservatism thereby hindering liberal ideals around plurality and acceptance. The latter suggests that it is first and foremost the exploration of difference, not similarity, which provides the tension to question our preconceived moral values and constructions and thereby move to more inclusive ones. Through contextualising these theories within the reflective spaces at the borders of interfaith dialogue, this paper suggests that bridging difference does not lie in making religious comparisons but rather in accepting religious ambiguity in pursuit of truth. The burgeoning area of comparative theology offers both theoretical and practical guidance for embracing religious diversity in a multi-religious world.*

**Introduction**

The contemporary world is religiously diverse. Different cultures and religions intermingle. This raises important social as well as theological questions. Does only one religious tradition contain insight into truth or do all? Can we learn from other traditions or should we hold our own religious tradition is complete in our relationship with the divine? This paper explores these questions within the broader context of interfaith dialogue and the need to add conceptual clarity around its understanding and practice.

A guiding principle of interfaith dialogue, as Leonard Swidler, Professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University claims, is 'for each participant to learn from the other so that s/he can change and grow' (2013). Defined more broadly in terms of the purposeful interaction between members of different religious groups to promote mutual understanding, interfaith dialogue has garnered high profile support. Programs delivered by secular organisations as diverse as the World Bank, the Anna Lindh Foundation and UNESCO has ensured that interfaith dialogue has entered the language of contemporary society in the form of international partnerships, cross-cultural exchanges and sustainable social development. It is a key aspect of the U.N. International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022), an important focus of the educational work of the Anna Lindh Foundation (Volpi 2008) and a part of the World Bank's policy of fighting poverty (Marshall & Saanen 2007). Alongside the establishment on the world stage of centres working internationally for the advancement of interfaith dialogue, there is also a proposal for an interfaith council at the UN. In the context of a world in which religious- based difference is seen as a threat, interfaith dialogue is viewed as a potential harmonising and accommodating framework to support unity within the diversity of humankind.

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Interfaith dialogue may be a practice whose time has come but it is also one which faces many challenges. Beyond a reconciliatory focus, there are multiple areas of uncertainty surrounding its implementation. At present the field is characterised by diversity in understandings of dialogue (Fletcher 2013), disciplinary basis (Neufeldt 2011) and theoretical orientation. Such divergences have contributed to an identified need to develop a robust theoretical basis for interfaith dialogue. As Marianne Moyaert argues ‘we are at the level of practice, of encounter and action, and not at the level of theory’ (2013 p 204).

This does not mean that the field of interfaith dialogue is lacking in conceptual thought. The broad area of dialogue has a deep theoretical basis. Likewise, the discipline of comparative theology has both a strong dialogical and theoretical orientation. Interestingly both these areas foreground the problem of bias and the learning required to bridge such bias. Despite this however there has been a significant scholarly absence to exploring the connection between interfaith dialogue, social learning and religious based bias.

This paper addresses this void. It looks initially at the work of diverse dialogue scholars as well as the burgeoning discipline of comparative theology. It then explores both the notion of implicit bias and social learning within the interfaith space to suggest a theoretical framework for interfaith dialogue. The central message, utilising a principle of comparative theology, is that the dialogue path is not simply about peace and harmony but also an inner journey in how we view difference. The paper ends by exploring interfaith dialogical approaches to answer the two questions stated above.

### **Dialogue**

Direct meanings of dialogue can differ depending upon one’s perspective. Most approaches to dialogue however hold close to a social constructivist understanding of reality. From a social constructivist position, truth is emergent and made in interaction, rather than given, eschewing singular perspectives which are partial and limited (Kim & Kim 2008). In this regard, dialogue represents the quintessential form of constructivist communication, deriving meaning through engaging with difference for the purpose of sharing and constructing new cultural meanings (Escobar 2009). It moves beyond expressions of religious diversity and mutual understanding to the creation of something new, together (Platform for Intercultural Europe & Culture Action Europe 2010). In requiring us to challenge, question and to reflect upon our own meanings and to ethically question the meanings of others, it demands a spirit of inquiry rather than advocacy in the knowledge that no singular religious group has a monopoly on truth. As a consequence, new knowledge is at once purposely constructed and idiosyncratic in what may broadly be defined as a continual learning process. A central aim, thereby, is not simply communication but also the creation of an ethical, humanitarian space where dissent and difference may be expressed to thereby stimulate collective, creative expressions through reciprocal inquiry.

Notions of dialogue, in the form of discussion between master and student, may be identified in the early Hindu classical literature of India and in the Ch’an Buddhist literature of China (Besley and Peters 2011). It is the Greek philosopher Socrates, however, known chiefly through the writings of his student Plato, who has been the key influential historical figure on dialogue in modern western civilisation. His works, which focussed on rational debate and an ethical engagement with the other, served as an inspirational source for academic debate as the nature of conversational exchanges became once more a focus of academic attention from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Rule 2004).

The existential philosopher Martin Buber (1965), together with the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans Georg Gadamer (1989), the reciprocity of Bakhtin (1984) and to a lesser extent the rational re-constructionism of Jürgen Habermas (1984) have become synonymous with the concept of dialogue through their studies on what may be termed 'ethical communication'. Others may be added to this list. Paulo Freire, who has been hugely influential in the area of pedagogy and human development through his critical orientation to dialogue and David Bohm, who sees in dialogue a vehicle to human consciousness, are two such figures. Aligned with social constructivism, each of these scholars foreground dialogue as a phenomenon of co-creation and tension (Stewart & Zediker 2000).

These scholars have also been instrumental in the emerging area of interfaith theory. Keaton and Soukup (2009) have proposed a pluralistic conceptualization of interfaith dialogue based on Bakhtin's work, highlighting the reciprocity and mutuality between stakeholders while paying attention to ontology and the social context. Abu Nimer (1999) has applied conflict resolution theory to interreligious settings drawing on the work of peace activist John Paul Lederach (1995) who in turn drew on Paulo Freire's critical approach to dialogue. Marianne Moyaert (2013) offers a hermeneutical theory for interreligious dialogue deriving inspiration through the work of Paul Ricoeur. Paul Ricoeur, in turn, is frequently compared to Gadamer's own hermeneutic interreligious positioning.

An important point is that each dialogue scholar views dialogue through a different prism (Besley and Peters 2011) and is seen to be applicable to different areas of the human experience. Habermas, as an example, is particularly suitable for exploring rational deliberation within the dialogical space. Buber on the other hand, holds to a more reflective focus, while Freire has an andragogical orientation. This does not mean that understandings of dialogue need be constructed around the ideas of a single scholar. Nor does it mean that a given orientation to dialogue is suitable only for certain social contexts. It does indicate however that the lens through which we look can only ever be incomplete; an interpretation of reality rather than reality itself.

As such there is a need to be transparent with regards to the orientation we take to dialogue. Given the orientation of this paper in promoting the centrality of learning to interfaith dialogue, I find the work of Freire and to a lesser extent Buber and Bohm to be particularly useful. As I discuss in greater detail below, these three dialogue scholars engage deeply in the social learning processes so evident in interfaith dialogue itself.

### **Social learning and dialogue**

Freire (1970) shares the viewpoint that every dialogical encounter exists within a complex of social reality as participants themselves choose to see it. Social learning theory suggests that participation in a learning environment evolves from our aspirations to be part of, develop and negotiate our own sense of identity. In this regard the creation of knowledge is always a socially and morally situated practice. For Freire, non-coercive, open-ended and reciprocal dialogue activates the creative mind and thereby frees it, enabling those who feel silenced to vocalise their needs and aspirations. Freire utilises the term 'oppressed' for people whose voices are limited for diverse reasons and through diverse means. In doing so he brings into the dialogue space the concept of power and voice both external and internal to the individual. Although Freire's focus is on social class, I would argue that his ideas could be transferred to any social based construction of difference inclusive of the interfaith encounter.

Of particular note is that Freire positions dialogue as a struggle which is both external, between individuals and internal, within individuals; a struggle of engagement with what makes us

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distinctly human while under the realization ‘that we can only ever become more fully human’ (Roberts 2005 p.136). Critical reflection and the recognition of the human within the other is an essential aspect of this process. In other words, dialogue, along the lines of Freire’s understanding, is a never-ending action as people grapple with difficult, complex processes arriving at unfinished places in a journey of both discovery and of humanizing change.

Buber (1970) extends the reflective lens beyond actual vocal conversation to include the silent spaces within, either in communion with another, or in communion with oneself. As Buber notes:

A dialogical relation will show itself ... in genuine conversation, but it is not composed of this. Not only is the shared silence of two such persons a dialogue, but also their dialogical life continues, even when they are separated in space, as the continual potential presence of the one to the other, as an unexpressed intercourse (1970 p. 125).

Buber (1970), in contrast to Freire, sees the dialogic relationship in terms of a concrete and life-enhancing possibility born by understanding one another in a spirit of authenticity through everyday life (Stewart and Zediker, 2009). Such a perspective brings into question where dialogue begins and ends as well as the nature of such dialogue and the importance of silence. Buber would argue that dialogue continues beyond conversation into the silent reflections of oneself.

Bohm (1996), by further contrast, charges that each person has a set of absolute meanings that they cannot readily move away from. From a Bohmian point of view, an important function of dialogue is to reveal these meanings so that they may be explored and the assumptions uncovered. Through learning how to dissociate themselves from their reified thoughts, according to Bohm, people can thereby develop a different relationship with both their reasoning and emotional processes and how they come to know those processes. As a consequence, Bohmian dialogue is concerned with meaning and assumption alongside the generation and the questioning of abstract generalisations about one’s own identity and the identities of others.

Collectively Freire, Buber and Bohm present a learning-based understanding of dialogue inclusive of the socio-cultural context (Freire), deep personal reflection and mutuality (Buber) and the acknowledgement of meaning (Bohm). Each presents a pathway to positive change emphasizing the importance of critical understanding (Freire), communion (Buber) and suspension of thought (Bohm). As they warn us however, the journey to change is never easy for it requires us to come face to face with our own fears (Freire), assumptions (Bohm) and incomplete sense of humanity (Buber). In short, it demands that we understand the bias within.

### **Implicit bias**

At the heart of interfaith dialogue lies a core paradox. Religions promote a singular construction of truth, based on a doctrinal view to reality. This serves to both include others within the embrace of all humankind, while excluding others on the basis that they have a misplaced perception of truth. The result is a selective, circumscribed religious narrative. The narrative we live by is fundamentally an exclusive one. We cannot, at the same time be a pagan and a Christian; a Buddhist and a Muslim; a Protestant and a Catholic.

The power of tradition and our social context to inform and dictate the limits of our viewpoints is a recurring point made by dialogue scholars. Our cultural ‘horizon’, according to Gadamer (1989, p.304-306), is one frequently mired in ignorance and prejudice about both ourselves and

the other ensuring that we cannot readily move beyond that which we have already conceived of as 'truth'. Consequently, many of our assumptions are so closely tied to our sense of identity that we cannot resist defending them (Bohm 1996, p.10). Rather we choose an oppressive, inauthentic and monologic form of communication (Buber 1965) that, 'at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities' (Bakhtin 1984, p.292). At issue is that we, as human beings, are hard wired according to our moral philosophy. Our religious bias is so ingrained, deep set and tied to our sense of identity that we act through our deep-seated emotions rather than rational thought.

As social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2016), argues, our moral philosophy exists on a spectrum. People who strongly identify with a singular narrative believe that their religion is clearly defined, clearly bordered and ordained. They feel a bond with their faith and believe that this bond imposes moral obligations. Morals around loyalty, authority and sanctity are binding and important (Haidt, 2016 ). At the other end are the more cosmopolitan minded. Such people are comfortable with both religious diversity and religious ambiguity. They are inclined to identify with universal values where fairness and protection from harm are of higher value than authority, loyalty and sanctity.

While people at the extremes of this spectrum show dramatic differences from each other, many of us sit in the middle. The result is different discourses applied to the other. An orientation based on exclusion acts to legitimise a singular faith (thereby denying legitimacy to other faiths), by claiming a sense of moral authority on truth. A second, related discourse is that of deficit. It works on the assumption that 'the other faith' is inadequate, deficient or incomplete, lacking in fundamental understanding that puts it in deficit to one's own faith. A third category acknowledges the legitimacy and value of the other faith, but only in a limited extent thereby negating the need for reflection or questioning of one's own beliefs. The fourth aspect draws on notions of universal humanity, compassion and respect to bridge the sense of constructed difference between one's own faith and that of the other. In so doing it also widens debate on questions of truth, identity and power.

Dialogue demands that we value the other, not because it confirms our sense of identity, but rather challenges us to question who we are. In other words, it shifts us towards humanitarian viewpoints. Discarding the notion of an exclusive singular truth, embedded in a complex nexus of values and priorities is deeply challenging, however. It is this space of challenge in the plural religious landscape that comparative theology offers a unique way of interacting with the challenge of otherness.

### **Comparative theology**

Comparative theology aims to deepen our understanding of religious truth through encounter with religious difference. Professor Francis Clooney, at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts positions comparative theology as 'a journey in faith'.

If it is theology, deep learning across religious borders, it will always be a journey in faith. It will be from, for, and about God, whose grace keeps making room for all of us as we find our way faithfully in a world of religious diversity (2011 p 165).

While rooted in one's own faith, comparative theology views religious diversity as a pathway and mechanism for knowing God better. Arvind Sharma, Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University, presents his approach to religious difference from a similar

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ethos. Sharma's concept of reciprocal illumination embodies the idea that something in another religious tradition may enrich our understanding of our own religious tradition. As he notes what if one compares things not in order to judge one item in terms of another, but to see how our understanding of the items themselves is enhanced in the process... (Sharma, 2005, p 246).

Arvind Sharma is circumspect with how much we can learn about the other. As he notes, our understanding is always framed by our own limited experiences. Only by converting to another point of view can we truly understand their world. Sharma indicates however that we do not have to enter the world of the other. Rather, the point is to be challenged by the other. In seeking difference, we can extend our understanding of ourselves and thereby realise 'that apparently different phenomena may also unexpectedly shed similar light' (Sharma, p 254). Sharma and Clooney have added an important element to understandings of interfaith dialogue demanding that we see beyond our own preconceived perceptions in order to understand our moral bias. The focus on difference, on learning and on change enables us to view the religious other not as a challenge to our deep-set feelings about our self but as a resource to enable us to explore the mysteries within. It is this space of difference, learning and change that are essential elements for a theoretical framework of interfaith dialogue from a learning-based perspective.

**An interfaith framework**

I have constructed an interfaith framework according to three principles a) recognition of difference, b) learning across difference and c) transformation. In order to explain this framework, I layout each facet and contextualise it with examples from comparative theology in the context of the two questions in the opening paragraph of the introduction; repeated here.

Does only one religious tradition contain insight into truth or do all?

Can we learn from other traditions or should we hold that our own religious tradition is complete in our journey in our relationship with the divine?

**a) Recognition of difference**

*Interfaith dialogue takes place in a space of moral tension where identities of both the self and the other are transitive, imagined, self-ascribed and imposed.*

Rabbi Erik H Yoffie (2011) makes the point that

meaningful dialogue happens when the conversation turns to our religious differences. ... when we recognize that absent a clear affirmation of who we are, how we are different and what we truly believe, all our conversations are likely to come to nothing.

A key challenge in Yoffie's quote is to truly understand the complexity of who we are. It is far easier to refer to both ourselves and to others through the labels we construct. Anita Ray, Honorary Fellow in the Centre for Inter-religious Dialogue, Faculty of Theology and Philosophy at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, gives a very good example of such imposed labels applied to the positioning of Australian Aboriginal people.

Indigenous Australian peoples have been contained within categories that non-Indigenous people have constructed for them. The power-holders in Australia have told them who they are and have scripted their roles, attempting to homogenize them (Ray, 2014, p 64)

Power, categorization and homogenisation are three elements that Ray points to which place the 'other' in deficit.

Unfortunately, it is often far easier to relate to the 'Christian', the 'Muslim' or the 'pagan' through the labels we apply to these categories than the people themselves. As Clooney argues however (2011 n.p.), 'we should be increasingly reluctant to confuse the necessary shorthand claims we make about religions...with the full, adequate account of those traditions'. The recognition of difference goes far beyond the labels and categories we place on others (and on ourselves). Rather it is embedded in the moral pursuit of our experiences and in valuing the experiences of others. Recognizing our propensity to categorize and replace experience with labels enables us to navigate our assumptions and judgements from a position of vulnerability. The following statement, by Paul F. Knitter, Paul Tillich Professor of Theology, World Religions and Culture at Union Theological Seminary, New York (2013 p 15) offers insight into the difference between experience and the potential emptiness of words that so often we use to replace experience.

"God" must be an experience before "God" can be a word. Unless God is an experience, whatever words we might use for the Divine will be without content, like road signs pointing nowhere, like lightbulbs without electricity. Buddha would warn Christians...: if you want to use words for God, make sure that these words are preceded by, or at least coming out of, an experience that is your own.

As such, before we can begin to understand the Muslim, the Buddhist, the Jew we must experience what these labels mean from their perspective, not our own. So often however we see the other with our bias, not our discernment.

Shifting our viewpoint to 'experience' rather than the words which describe experience and the labels we apply to otherness enables us to extend our sense of religious identity. From this perspective Knitter makes a profound point in reference to his 'practice' of learning from Buddhists. As Knitter notes (2013, p 155) Buddhists are good at

Unitive experiences in which the self is so transformed that it finds itself through losing itself. And that's where I believe Christians can learn a lot from Buddhists. By watching how Buddhists go about achieving their 'goals', Christians can better 'come home' to their own.

Knitter emphasizes a dimension of faith structured on seeking truth in preference to identifying with defined, constructed and absolute meanings. Coming from a position that questions religious sanctity to favour the individual right to learn, Knitter eschews the moral authority and loyalty of singular religious doctrine to prioritise universal moral fairness. In other words, difference between religions is not in the labels applied to certain groups but in the journey towards evocative questions and nuanced answers (Steinkerchner 2011).

***b) Learning across difference***

*An exploration and negotiation of meanings, objects or aspects of the self through participative structures that affirm and extend a person's sense of belonging and identity to a more inclusive group through the considered construction of a shared vision, a shared practice or a shared goal.*



The theoretical framework of interfaith dialogue constructed above indicates that it is not just recognizing difference that is important but also in bridging difference. A learning-based approach to dialogue, which highlights the creation of meanings in the vicinity of a wider discourse on reality, brings into focus not just difference but the bridging of difference. Creating a learning space supporting a more inclusive sense of identity, requires us to identify beyond that which divides us to points of difference we can learn from.

Believers, regardless of one's religion, are seekers of truth. Haidt (2012) indicates that the pursuit of truth can bring people together who normally would be opposed to each other. Religious truth however, is always mysterious and elusive. As comparative theologian Scott Steinkerchner argues, 'None of us individually, nor all of us collectively, possess a complete understanding of our faith. That fullness of truth lies forever in the future' (2011, p. 149).

The answer to the guiding question of this paper lies in whether we feel comfortable in recognizing the value other religious traditions hold for us in our pursuit of the divine. In a world which traditionally has favoured a singular religious identity, cultural plurality is suggestive that we can no longer treat 'the other' as entirely separate from ourselves. What becomes interesting is the moral framework that underpins our positions and thereby how we approach otherness.

Above I argued that we, as individuals have a choice with regards to our moral outlook on reality. People who identify with a singular narrative, who believe that their religion is clearly defined, clearly bordered and ordained are more likely to base their morality on loyalty, authority and sanctity. By contrast, the more cosmopolitan minded are inclined to prioritise fairness and protection from harm over authority, loyalty and sanctity. The result is different discourses, and biased understandings of otherness.

Comparative theologians challenge such moral frameworks by practicing a form of deep learning based on the premise that it is not only possible to learn from difference but to deepen one's relationship with God *through* difference. Working at the borders of faith enables people who practice thus to both learn from the religious other and to hear God's truth in a different way. From such a perspective the argument that encounter with other faiths can weaken one's own faith is all part of the journey. The cultural dissonance through the exposure to challenge can create new insights around one's own faith and one's own truth. As Knitter would argue, an exclusive approach to religious worship based on a singular moral authority denies the spiritual learning accessible from the diversity of humankind.

### ***c) Transformation***

*The enablement of people to initiate a process of mutual action, critical consciousness, and shared humanity for the purpose of positive human change.*

The following quote by Clooney extends the discussion above on the value of religious encounter.

Instead of trying to protect the tradition from the possibility of contamination that goes together with encounter, comparative theologians intentionally move to the borderland of tradition. As go-betweens, they invest in learning from the other, accepting that this also entails disturbing experiences of alienation, disenchantment, and friction (2011, p. 165).

There are two points I wish to highlight in this quote. One is the focus on invested learning and the other is the ‘alienation, disenchantment, and friction’, associated with such learning. Transformation in our own lives demand that we learn and take on the challenges around us. In this regard interfaith dialogue always presents as a choice. A choice around leaving the theological comfort zone to learn something new. In doing so we will encounter rich learning opportunities that extend our understanding. Likewise, for interfaith dialogue, seeking difference, rather than similarity and learning from such difference also presents as an unknown journey; but one of rich possibility. The work of people such as Clooney, Knitter and Sharma informs us that a possible pathway to God lies in neither opposing or agreeing with otherness but rather creating a space of reflection around the doubt.

### **Conclusion**

I began this paper with two principle related questions.

Does only one religious tradition contain insight into truth or do all?  
Can we learn from other traditions or should we hold that our own religious tradition as complete in our relationship with the divine?

In the context of interfaith dialogue my suggestion, based on the ideals of comparative theology, is that we look to explore difference between religions more broadly contextualised through the human need to search for meaning within the vicinity of the divine. A principle challenge lies in the unconscious ways that we see both ourselves and others within the myriad of meanings that constitute our modern lives. A learning based dialogical approach informed through comparative theology suggests that the value of interfaith dialogue lies not in protecting our viewpoints but in realising our vulnerability. Doing so enables us to not only to learn but to change and to promote change in others. If we are going to act on the challenges of our capitalistic, spiritually complex and politically divergent world, ‘otherness’ presents not as challenge but a facilitative factor for defining who we are.

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