

Bases and Boundaries for Interfaith Dialogue: A Christian Viewpoint

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This paper is written directly from experience. It is not a survey of previously-published scholarly and official church statements. While in itself useful and necessary, such a survey scarcely seems to serve the purpose of the present dialogue.¹ A statement from experience, on the other hand, is useful only in proportion to its fidelity to what is actually taking place within the community as a whole. The task of this paper, therefore, is understood as one of discerning within the Christian communities at present the possibilities for a deeper engagement in dialogue with the Jewish and Muslim communities, and discerning likewise the factors that may restrain the Christian communities from such deeper engagement.² What may be the possibilities and restraints operating with the Jewish and Muslim communities is understood here to be the task of the complementary papers.

It must be acknowledged clearly at the outset that Christianity is not a univocal tradition, and that Christian communities and denominations today will not all agree to particular proposals concerning dialogue. In order that there may be a clear and sharp focus, this paper is presented primarily from the point of view of the Roman Catholic tradition, with an acknowledgement of major differences with other groups where appropriate. The task is further complicated by wide doctrinal variation even within particular churches and denominations, especially the range of positions from a strictly fundamentalist to a radically critical interpretation of documents and doctrines.³

It might at first sight appear that it is our common convictions that propel us to dialogue and our unique convictions that set the limits to that dialogue. A more complex pattern is here proposed: it is the very nature of the Christian's commitment to proclaim the experience of Jesus of Nazareth as Savior and Word of God that propels the Christian community to dialogue with respect for the freedom and the truth of the others.⁴ More particularly it propels Christians to a dialogue with other communities claiming a message of universal salvation. Among these the dialogue becomes more immediately urgent with those whose proclamation of universal salvation stems from the same biblical roots but branches out into quite different interpretations of history.⁵

This will certainly appear as a highly contrary thesis. Yet it is evident that if Christians could regard Jesus as savior of a statically defined Christian sector of the human race, there would be little urgency or theological need for dialogue. Christians could then live side by side with those of other persuasions, quietly minding their own business, inquiring perhaps into the folkways and beliefs of other communities for diplomatic or purely academic reasons. Such dialogue would remain forever peripheral to Christian theology and Christian identity. It is precisely because they proclaim a universal salvation, and proclaim the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth as a saving power in the history of the whole human race, that Christians are driven to dialogue by a systematic and practical exigence that arises out of the very center of the Christian understanding and commitment. The Christian understanding and commitment can not be authentically maintained within the Christian community if it is not in fact engaged in the continuous dynamic of serious dialogue with outsiders.

The subject matter of such dialogue obviously is not a debate over the conflicting truth claims of different traditions. Sober reflections on the nature of religious language and religious experience

and on the cultural and epistemological bases of religious claims have long since convinced thinking persons of 0 traditions that there is no “unbiased” procedure by which to judge among the conflicting truth claims of different traditions. The subject matter of such dialogue from the Christian viewpoint must be concerned with the nature of salvation. Because Christians are committed to proclaiming salvation in Jesus the Christ, they are required by their own commitment to seek an understanding to what that salvation is, why it is linked to the person of Jesus, and how it can be universally meaningful. Christians are bound to tell their story and to listen in order to learn what others hear in it. Likewise they are bound to listen to stories of the other traditions, to try to find out what their understanding of salvation is; why it is linked to particular persons, events, and teachings; and how it can be meaningful in terms of their own experience. They are bound to this simply by the demands for inner coherence of their own stance.

Thus far the need for dialogue would direct Christians equally toward Hindus, Buddhists, and even Marxists. But the demands become very much more urgent in relation to Jews and Muslims, though the pattern is not quite symmetrical in these two relationships. The Christian community looks toward the Jews with the claim that the Christian community, though still looking forward to a final fulfillment, has already experienced through the person of Jesus the definitive realization of the promises and hopes of Israel. For its own self-understanding, therefore, the Christian community is required to search not only for the sense in which those hopes and promises were understood by Israel before the time of Jesus, but also for the way they are understood now by those who expect salvation in the Jewish tradition and not through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, without intent to proselytize but rather for their own understanding of their own position, Christians are driven to ask Jews what it is that they expect and do not see in the person and the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.⁶

When Christians turn in the direction of the Muslims, their question and their quest are somewhat different. In effect they must ask themselves, and therefore they must ask the Muslims, why the message of salvation in Jesus the Christ with its universal claim has in the course of history been complemented by a vast people, gathered from many nations, coming likewise to worship the God of Israel, but in a distinctively different tradition that denies the universality of the Christian claim. For their own self-understanding, Christians must ask themselves what the experience of being called to salvation is for those who are brought into submission to the one God as followers of the Prophet. They must ask wherein lies the difference between Christians and Muslims in the interpretation of the ancient hopes and promises passed on to them from Israel.

Of course, these questions to Jews and Muslims could be asked simply in the context of ethnology and of social and political and cultural history, and within these contexts they could be answered. But if these answers were to be taken as complete, they could lead only to a sense of the cultural relativity of all convictions and a certain cynical indifference to the truth claims of one's own tradition. The questions must be asked seriously in a theological context, expecting further insight into the various ways that the need for salvation is experienced and understood, and into the various ways that persons, events, and teachings promising salvation have been experienced and understood.

The dialogue concerning the meaning of salvation can not and does not take place in a vacuum, however. It assumes the meaning of some common terms and understandings and the need to explain some unique terms. What, follows is an attempt to set out the more important points in each of these categories from the Christian perspective.

Chief among the common points of departure is certainly our understanding of the One God, transcendent, benign, provident, all-powerful, intervening in history to judge and redeem, self-revealing to those who seek, forever mysterious but offering the possibility of personal relationship in prayer and the direction of one's life.⁷ To know that others claim self-revelations from the same God that we ourselves worship is an invitation to discover the content of the revelation as perceived by the others. To know that others worship the same God that we worship

is to know also that somewhere in our experience there lie possibilities for common prayer, though it may only be a prayer of wordless quiet. To hold that this God intervenes in history to judge and to redeem implies a willing ear for testimonies expressing perceptions from other traditions of the judgements and the redemption.

The basis for assuming that the three traditions are in a sense on common ground here is that for all three God is an ultimately inscrutable mystery, and the self-revelation that is received is never exhaustive of the reality. Nor is that self-revelation ever apprehended in strictly appropriate concepts or in univocal images; religious language can only be the language of poetry, of analogy, of subtle hints of the inexpressible. From a fundamentalist position in which this is not admitted, there can be but little meaning to dialogue with a tradition other than one's own. If the assumption is made that not only the revelation, but all the language in which it is apprehended and expressed, is divinely guaranteed as timeless, changeless, beyond critical examination, having intrinsic and exclusive validity quite independent of historical and cultural conditioning, then there can not be a common ground from which dialogue between traditions can take place.

A second common point of departure is the (often unspoken) assumption that history has a goal, that time is not only cyclic (which it assuredly is) but also linear, that salvation is not only a salvation of the human spirit from the world but is quite comprehensively salvation of the world. The god of the biblical religions is not seen as other than Master of the universe, Lord of history, Lord of all being, and Ruler of the day of reckoning. All history is under God's judgement, and all peoples are God's people summoned to find their own fulfillment in doing God's will. That will is recognized constantly as justice-justice on a grand social scale, not only a certain relative justice in one-to-one relationships.⁸

This common base seems to offer very clear grounds for dialogue among the three traditions on matters of social justice and the relief of largescale human suffering and deprivation. At least in theory, it offers a basis for meaningful dialogue in matters as thorny and urgent as colonial oppression, racial oppression, remnants of slave trading, the State of Israel, the plight of the Palestinians, various liberation struggles, societal role restrictions on women, deprivation of civil rights of certain groups, and so forth. These obviously are not points at which dialogue might be expected to begin, but neither may they be categorically ruled out as possible areas of dialogue. The self-interest and mutual distrust of power groups may pose almost insurmountable obstacles, but the religious bases for dialogue on these issues exist in the teachings concerning a goal for all history, the ultimate unity of the whole human race before God, and the divine demand for social justice that does not exclude the poor and powerless.

Again, it must be noted that such a common base does not appear so clearly from positions more or less approximating the fundamentalist one. When it is understood that the law of God and the plan of God have been set forth once and for all, explicitly and in every detail, there can be little room for moral questions about new situations that arise in the course of time, and obedience to the divine will is readily reduced to private lives of individual persons and to certain archaic patterns of association in groups within the tradition. For dialogue among traditions there can be even less room. Yet it must also be noted that such a common base seems to be equally absent in certain liberal positions which see almost all elements of the tradition as culturally relative and expendable, simply because such positions adapt very readily to fit the national or partisan interests of their own group, and they read the situation from that vantage point.

A third common base or point of departure is closely linked to the second, but does appear to be a different point. This is the election or vocation of each person and the election or vocation of the community. It is a calling to a way of life that is a communion with God and a call to community or peoplehood with prescribed patterns of relationship and duties toward others. The three traditions make reference to the same basic vocation stories concerning Noah, Abraham, and Moses, which are models of individual election but also of the elections of the people. Each tradition interprets history rather differently in the light of these stories, in applying the election or calling to itself. Yet this appears as a common point of departure and as a conviction that rather

peremptorily impels the traditions to dialogue with one another (as has indeed happened, peacefully or otherwise, since early times).⁹

A community which claims to have been chosen in some special way as God's instrument of redemption of the world is compelled to ask itself how it stands in relation to other communities that claim a similar election from the same God, if only because of the need to define its own claim for its own members. Yet each community can really only come to an authentic answer to its own question in the process of open dialogue that solicits testimony from the other communities as to how they interpret their traditions and their election in the changing contexts of the present. There is no other way to distinguish oneself or one's position from others than that which begins with an attentive inquiry into the nature and the characteristics of the others.

It may seem paradoxical, yet it seems that it is the very universality and apparent mutual exclusivity of our claims that provides the necessary basis for a fruitful and substantive dialogue. Any position that attempts to reduce or obscure the claim to a unique election related to the universal plan of God would seem to reduce rather than enhance the foundations for dialogue. So, of course, will any position that sees the doctrine of election as simple, fully explicit, and univocal, and as having attained a timeless formula capable of direct and universal application. Any position between these two moves naturally into dialogue in its quest for a more comprehensive and coherent understanding in the contemporary context.

A fourth common base has been quietly assumed in the presentation of the preceding three. This is the common heritage of biblical lore and spiritual ancestors. There is an available common language of symbols (found in persons and events), and an available common pool of models and points of reference. The biblical stories that form the common lore seem also to be precisely those that offer the most basic and universal insights and understandings, the most archetypal images and visions. Moreover, these biblical stories with their symbolism have remained both foundational and explicit in all three traditions. They carry assumptions and attitudes that may not be underestimated, as to creation, the providence of God in history, the nature of the faith response, or submission and obedience. It is, for instance, quite clear to 'Christians that when Jews and Muslims speak to each other about Isaac and Ishmael, each may not like what the other is saying, but they both understand very well what it is that they are discussing. Likewise, when Christians invoke the Pauline understanding of Isaac as the child of the promise, and claim thereby to be the true children of Abraham, Jews may object to the exegesis, but they object because they understand it. All of this offers a not insubstantial base for effective dialogue on important issues for three traditions concerned.¹⁰

Having given brief consideration to these four points of common basis, one is left with the task of considering those unique convictions or positions of Christianity which are bound to affect the possibilities of dialogue with the other two traditions. First and most obvious among these is the Christian preception of revelation and redemption as focused in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. At first sight this seems to be primarily a hindrance to dialogue, something for which the Christian community should apologize, explaining that it can do no other than to hold and proclaim this, but that it nevertheless wishes to enter into dialogue with its biblical neighbors.

As pointed out in the beginning of this paper, however, such an admission and apology would seem to be premature. If the aim in dialogue is a fuller understanding of the position of the other, in order the better to grasp the inner logic of one's own position and in order to achieve some clarity and authenticity in relations with the other tradition, then the central and constitutive claim on which one's own tradition rests must be placed centrally in the dialogue also. As such, it offers a rather solid platform for an exchange of perceptions and perspectives. In confrontation with Jews and Muslims, Christians must either be silent or must give an account of what the revelation and redemption are that they have experienced in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and they must attempt this account in language other than the technical "churchy" language which already assumes the experience. They must attempt to account for their experience and conviction in language that is experientially meaningful to those who are outsiders to the Christian tradition.¹¹

Such attempts can not but be sources of thoroughgoing renewal within the Christian community itself, although they will be regarded as dangers to “the Faith” by those holding more fundamentalist positions in which the technical “churchy” language stands in its own right as divinely guaranteed. Likewise, such dialogue can not but be a source of more coherent relationships with the outsiders to the tradition, although certain more liberal elements within the Christian tradition will see a danger to the ecumenical or dialogic endeavor whenever the unique claims and teachings are put forth as subject matter for interfaith conversation.

At this point, some crucial limits or restricting boundaries to the dialogue may be noted. They are not doctrinal but practical. Christians can not speak very clearly about revelation and redemption experienced in Jesus of Nazareth in the presence of Jews because centuries of anti-semitism and oppression obscure the testimony. Likewise, Christians have considerable difficulty inquiring of Jews concerning the Jewish understanding of revelation and redemption, because Jews tend to suspect a proselytizing drive and are conscious of being a minority for whom the possibility of discrimination, contempt, and outright persecution is never remote. Even in Israel today, the situation can not be said to be substantially more favorable; Jews readily interpret such inquiry as judgmental on the conduct of the State of Israel and its relations with the Palestinians, while Christians are embarrassed by being unable in conscience to give the unconditional approval to everything Israel does, which is often demanded as a prelude to serious dialogue.¹²

When Christians address themselves to Muslims in dialogue concerning revelation and redemption experienced in Jesus the Christ, and revelation and redemption as experienced according to the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, there are again obstacles which are not doctrinal or theological, but rather practical and historical. Christian voices are heard by Muslims in the context of the Crusades and of colonialism under Christian auspices, so that any message of peace, humility, reconciliation, and forgiveness sounds quite hollow. Moreover, the Christian gospel advocacy of simplicity of life and the blessedness of the poor is seen as ludicrous in the context of the colossal economic imperialism of the “Christian” West against which all Third World nations must contend. At the same time, the situation is not much better in the other direction, because Christians are likely to hear anything the Muslims say in the context of a fear of Holy Wars, internal violence in Muslim countries, terrorism, despotic governments, oppression of women, and harsh persecution of non-Muslims. Much as this may be a caricature, it does in practice tend to cloud and obscure testimonies concerning the true nature of Islam.

These practical considerations may not be underestimated. The possibility for any genuine dialogue at all certainly depends on the willingness of some scholars and religious representatives to achieve a physiological distance from these historical and practical stumblingblocks, by willingness to consider not the achievements of the other parties but the aims and desires intrinsic in the religious position of each. More habitually each group evaluates its own position by its ideals and the position of the others by their performance. From this nothing but further prejudice and failure of understanding can arise.

Yet even when these problems have been somewhat overcome by persons and groups particularly dedicated to dialogue, there remains at all times the question as to the extent to which they represent their respective communities. It is a frequent experience that groups with a mandate from their communities to engage in dialog draw up a coherent and far-reaching statement that represents real progress in mutual understanding among the partners to the dialogue, only to find at the end of their labors that the respective mandating authorities in their own communities will not approve the statement. Such statements are then frequently reduced to rather unsatisfactory evasions and compromises that were already in vogue before the dialogue was set up.¹³ What seems to be at stake is the question whether dialogue with the other traditions can be delegated to specialized groups or whether it must be conducted at the heart of the religious and theological enterprise of each community.¹⁴

Having noted the negative aspects that restrict dialogue concerning the central issue for Christians, one must note two further unique convictions from the Christian viewpoint which play

an important role in dialogue. One of these is the role of the church or, more accurately, of the many Christian churches which exist today in a state of considerable ambivalence toward one another. Though the churches do act jointly on some issues, and although there have been great ecumenical advances in the contemporary experience, it must frankly be admitted that the Christian churches, claiming to live by the same gospel of Jesus the Christ, are in a condition of rather extensive dissociation from one another. There is a double disadvantage for interfaith dialogue in this condition of dissociation. Not only does the dialogue tend to represent and speak for some-churches and not others, but the very concept of church and the understanding of the role of the church in the society at large and in the redemption do in fact vary widely from church to church. The primary referent in this essay is the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church.

The role of the church is bound to present problems to Jewish and Muslim partners in dialogue inasmuch as it is not coextensive with a people racially, ethnically, culturally, or politically. In fact, theologically, the church can only be understood as that community of witnesses that mediates between Jesus the Christ and the final realization of the Reign of God among all human persons and peoples which Jesus proclaimed and promised. The church may be understood as an assembling or a movement of such witnesses in history, although it most obviously appears as an institution and usually as a rather powerful hierarchic structure.¹⁵ As many reflective Christians view it today and have viewed it in the course of history, the church is necessarily a counterculture force, a critique of any established regime and social structure, a radicalizing force that judges every situation in relation to the vision of the promised Reign of God.¹⁶ Clearly this is by no means the way the church (or the larger churches taken as a group) has in fact conducted itself in most matters throughout the history of Christianity. Therefore, although it may puzzle and antagonize the outsider to the Christian tradition, Christian partners in the dialogue may say without any sense of hypocrisy or inconsistency that “the church does not condone” actions and situations which the outsider sees being done by Christians and perhaps even by those who appear as church representatives.

The church claims to be the gathering of those who have been “reborn” in the experience that Jesus who was crucified and died has burst forth again in irrepressible and unquenchable vitality that permeates the whole human race and all history with new and undreamed-of possibilities of fulfillment, reconciliation, and community. In Christian theology such persons become a witness community in a double sense: they have witnessed in the rebirth in their own lives the coming of the Reign of God, and they bear witness to others by their community life, their hope, their service, and their transforming impact. They do this, ideally, “from within,” that is, in community with similarly “reborn” persons—all willingly and creatively changing their relationships with one another to express what they have experienced.¹⁷

In this ideal picture, the “elect among the nations” who are called to this witness function are not thereby cut off from their diverse cultural and political affiliations, though these all become relativized in the light of an over-riding interest in the community of all the human race—an interest which is most particularly concerned with the poor, the outcast, and the suffering, as perennially represented by the Crucified.¹⁸ The issue is of course immensely complicated by the fact that through the centuries, sometimes by conquest, sometimes by princely “conversion” of whole peoples, there came about the identification of Christianity with the whole of Western culture and with the political structure of Europe, which we named Christendom, which was in due time extended also to the whole of the North and South American continents. It is quite common to speak of these as “Christian nations” and indeed governments often invoke Christian beliefs in their support, as in the power struggles of the West with the Communist countries, but from the point of view of most Christian ecclesiologies (which strongly favor separation of church and state) the term is almost meaningless.¹⁹ Most Christian spokespersons, whether church officials or theologians, will not accept the actions of their governments as attributable to the Christian community as such.

The clarification of this position is obviously rather important to interfaith dialogue, because both Jews and Muslims envisage as the ideal an integrated peoplehood in which the religious convictions are expressed in political, legal, economic, and cultural as well as religious ritual forms. This sets some limits or boundaries to the dialogue, which again involves practical, historical, as well as theoretical, problems. It may be very puzzling and irritating to Jews that Christian nations and even Christian churches have stood so aloof in the Lebanese civil strife, instead of leaping to the defense of their "Christian brothers and sisters" against the Muslims of that country. Israeli Jews may find it hard to understand that the so-called Christian nations do not experience any particular bond with the Christians of Lebanon, while all Jews may be horrified that the churches have generally been more concerned to disentangle the questions of social justice involved in the conflict than to support "their own".²⁰

A parallel problem arises in dialogue with Muslims, who frequently ask why Christian nations and Christian churches express support for the State of Israel when they should be supporting and defending their Arab Christian brothers and sisters from aggression, land expropriation, exile, deprivation of political rights, and harsh oppression.²¹ Thus Jews and Muslims use the same argument as an obstacle to dialogue, though for diametrically opposed practical purposes. The strong and fairly monolithic alignments of interest in the case both of both Jews and Muslims on a worldwide basis render it urgent, but also difficult, for Christians to represent their own total allegiance to the gospel as taking priority over their qualified allegiance to any particular group. It may well be that it is only in the context of a three-way interfaith dialogue that this particular element of dialogue can be put in its proper perspective.

The last and most crucial point to be made concerning the unique claims and teachings in the Christian tradition is of course that of the Trinitarian conception of God and the claim of divinity made on behalf of Jesus of Nazareth. It may seem at first sight that the very admission of these two doctrines simply vitiates all that has gone before. It seems so because the history of previous encounters over the centuries may suggest that interfaith dialogue comes to an impasse at that point. But previous encounters were conducted with a frame of reference much closer to simplistic fundamentalist positions, and much less aware of the cultural relativity and analogous nature of a religious language. It would seem to be supremely worthwhile to re-engage in dialogue precisely on these points, remembering again that the point of the dialogue is not proselytizing but the clarification of one's perception of the position of the others, in order thereby to clarify one's perception of one's own position and engage in more realistic and authentic relationships.

It should be no secret to Jews and Muslims that the doctrines of the Trinitarian Godhead and of the divinity of Jesus have been and are the subjects of searching inquiry, reflection, and renewed attempts at appropriate formulation by Christian scholars within their own circles, quite apart from the demands of interfaith dialogue.²² At the risk of over-simplification within this limited space, it may be said very briefly what the minimal formulations of these ancient doctrines are.²³ As to the Trinitarian "image" or conception of God, one may say with Josef Ratzinger that Christian faith is at pains to preserve at all costs a paradox it is not able logically to resolve—a paradox that reflects as faithfully as it can certain irreducible elements of the Christian experience. Christians worship the transcendent God of Israel, yet they know that in Jesus they had a self-validating experience of what it is to be in the presence of God uttered or expressed within history and within the human community, and at the same time they know that their experience of the presence and the power of God was not only in the person of Jesus long ago in history, but is in the Spirit that is alive and active now within the community of believers. Moreover, Christian faith is committed to the confident conviction that these diving self-revelations may be trusted, that God is in inner reality truthfully as God is revealed to us in history, though the reality clearly transcends what human knowing and imagining can grasp.²⁴ Jesus is experienced as the fullest possible, and therefore the definitive, self-expression of God in history and within the human community. Yet it must be said quickly that Jesus is not seen dissociated from the rest of the human race, but rather as "heading" or incorporating the human race within his own person and experience—a process that is seen as being yet unfinished.²⁵

The scandal of the particularity of the claims made for Jesus certainly stands at the heart of Christian faith, and raises the question as to the possibility of dialogue. Inasmuch as the religious language of the divinity claim—Son, Word, Image, light from light, one in being with the Creator, and so forth—is capable of the most varied and nuanced interpretations, much careful exploration of the meaning would seem to be appropriate in interfaith dialogue. However, the appropriate pathway into this exploration is by way of that which can be judged by outsiders by reference to their own experience. With reference to Christology that approach is through the experiential analysis of what is meant by salvation and why Christians claim a foretaste of salvation in their association with Jesus as the Christ.

It would seem to be suitable to conclude this essay with the question whether there is a language or a model that might serve in such interfaith dialogue as has been envisaged here. A language and model that would seem to be appropriate from the point of view of all three traditions is the biblical notion of the covenant or alliance of God with the people. As presented in the Hebrew scriptures, there appears to be only one covenant, expressed in various modes of participation—the covenant of creation realized in the Noachic covenant, very precisely focused and explicitly expressed in the intimate participation of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant. Jews have been willing to grant that Christians and Muslims claim rather a complementary participation in the Abrahamic covenant, and each claims in its own way to bring that covenant to its consummation. Inasmuch as all three traditions own and understand this language of covenant, it seems to provide an appropriate arena for an exchange of the alternative interpretations of the history of salvation (and the salvation of history).²⁶

There is a further image that seems to offer a very viable context for dialogue, and that is the image of the seed and the tree with the two great branches, proposed by Yehuda Halevi.²⁷ Israel sees itself as a witness people for God and as situated at the heart of the redemptive process, yet does not generally reach out in proselytizing efforts. Christianity and Islam see themselves as rooted in the revelation and promised redemption inherited from Israel, but as sent out to embrace all the nations. This much has not changed since the time of Yehuda Halevi, and the image appears to be as generative now as it was then.