The im-
Possibility
of
INTERRELIGIOUS
DIALOGUE

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CHAPTER ONE

HUMILITY

We need not be afraid of making them proud, because love of truth is always accompanied by humility. Real genius is nothing else but the virtue of humility in the domain of thought.

— SIMONE WEIL

The impulse to dialogue arises from the desire to learn, to increase one’s understanding of the other, of oneself, or of the truth. It thus presupposes humble awareness of the limitation of one’s own understanding and experience and of the possibility of change and growth. Contemporary language and everyday speech have come to associate the term “humility” with modesty, with a reluctance to accept rightfully deserved distinction and recognition. Humility may also be understood, however, in a more radical sense to denote a genuine acknowledgment of the limitation and imperfection of one’s insights and accomplishments, as indeed of all human realization and self-expression. In dialogue, it is such a humble awareness of the finite and partial nature of one’s own understanding that drives one from the same to the other, from complacency to an active search for growth in the truth.

Dialogue between religions requires at least two forms of humility in each participant or agent. Most evidently, it demands humility toward other traditions. This involves recognition of
CHAPTER TWO

COMMITMENT

Interreligious dialogue in the full sense of the term involves engagement between religions, or between individuals insofar as they confess adherence to their particular religious tradition. This does not necessarily entail a full compliance with every single aspect of the tradition, and still less a dogmatic insistence that what one holds must in any case be upheld without qualification. But it does presuppose commitment to a particular worldview and belief system and a willingness to attest to its truth and validity in dialogue with other worldviews and belief systems.

One of the challenges facing interreligious dialogue from within is the lurking sense of incompatibility between firm commitment to a particular religious tradition and openness to other religions. The history of religions seems to indicate that — exceptions notwithstanding — strong religious commitment coincides with religious intolerance, while attitudes of openness toward the truth of other religions somehow go together with a looser relationship to the truth of one's own tradition. Interreligious dialogue has often come to be conducted by individuals who find themselves on the margins of their own respective traditions, whether by necessity or by choice. This marginality may impose itself upon individuals as a result of attitudes of self-sufficiency and superiority that
CHAPTER THREE

INTERCONNECTION

One of the basic conditions for interreligious dialogue is a sense of commonality or solidarity among religions, and of the relevance of the other religion for one's own religious tradition. Any notion of the radical singularity or the fundamental incomparability of religions would render dialogue superfluous, if not impossible. Interreligious dialogue thus presupposes a conviction that, in spite of important and ineradicable differences in belief and practices, religions may find one another in a common ground. This meeting point between religions may be located in the past or in the future, in a common origin or goal outside or within religious traditions. It may be the starting point or the very goal of dialogue. But some belief in the interconnection or interrelatedness between religions is necessary in order to render dialogue both possible and meaningful.

This idea of interconnection between religions is far from evident. It runs first of all against religious self-understanding. Every religion tends to regard itself as unique, self-contained, and in no way comparable to the other religions of the world. But the notion of interconnection also flows against the current intellectual climate, with its emphasis on particularity and difference. All truth, religious or otherwise, is regarded as radically singular, fragmented, and perspectival, and any attempt to compare or relate different personal, cultural, or religious
CHAPTER FOUR

EMPATHY

One has not really heard the message of one of the real religions that have moved millions of people over centuries if one has not been really moved by it, if one has not felt in one's soul the power of it. — LESLIE NEWBIGIN

The possibility of genuine dialogue between religions requires not only a series of internally religious conditions, but also epistemological ones. One of the most basic requirements for dialogue is proper understanding of the other. While inter-religious dialogue is decidedly about more than an exchange of data, the question of whether or to what extent one can understand the other tradition does have a certain priority over the question of whether what has been discovered or understood can also be regarded as true. This epistemological question has been at the heart of the disciplines of comparative religion and history of religions. In the course of the twentieth century, the study of religion has gone through a series of dramatic swings as it has tried to find its place and status among the human sciences. From a cataloguing of data, it has moved through the development of grand narratives or theories about the essence of religion and religious phenomena, to more specialized studies of texts and traditions, and more

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CHAPTER FIVE

HOSPITALITY

When all of the necessary conditions are fulfilled, the possibility of interreligious dialogue still ultimately depends on the ability of one religion to recognize truth in the other. This attitude of generous openness to the (possible) presence of truth in the other religion may be called hospitality.¹ This term designates a recognition of the other as other and openness to learning from the other. Such hospitality constitutes the sole sufficient condition for dialogue. The very possibility of discovering authentic truth in the other should automatically awaken the desire for dialogue. And conversely, the denial of any truth beyond the boundaries of one’s own tradition would eliminate all desire for dialogue, even when all of the other conditions are met.

In the context of the dialogue between religions, the term “hospitality” is often used to designate the need to welcome the religious other in spite of religious differences.² Here, however, we use it to imply an attitude of openness and receptivity to those very differences as a possible source of truth. The possibility of growth and change in dialogue indeed depends on the recognition of truth in difference.

In the practice of dialogue, hospitality may be seen to have a special relation to humility: hospitality toward the truth of