

Dialogue From Below

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I was asked to respond from a Muslim point of view to David Tracy's paper entitled, "Christianity in the Wider Context: Demands and Transformations." I expected the contents of the paper to conform to its title but discovered, on reading the paper, that it did not deal with any substantive theological issue pertaining to, or arising from, interreligious dialogue between Christianity and other world religions including Islam. The author indeed admits, more than once, that his paper is concerned directly with "formal issues" of interreligious discussion rather than with "substantive theological ones." Nevertheless, the title as well as the structure of the paper lead one to expect that at least there will be some discussion beyond that of "formal issues," and when this does not happen, one is somewhat dismayed.

After stating what seems to many of us who have for years been engaged in interreligious dialogue to be all too obvious, namely, the need for Christian systematic theology to take serious note of "other religions," the author goes on to describe what he considers "a good initial strategy" for entering into the debate on "cultural pluralism." This strategy which is named "an analogical imagination" is believed by the author to be an effective means of creating the necessary emotional and intellectual basis for substantive theological discussion. Since I do not find anything specifically "Christian" about the views presented in the paper, I am not able to offer a specifically "Muslim" response to them. However, deriving from my involvement as a Muslim in various kinds of interreligious discussions and dialogues (particularly amongst Jews, Christians and Muslims) I would like to make a few observations about the methodology of such dialogue in general and about Christian-Muslim dialogue in particular.

Since we are living in what may be called "the age of dialogue," there is much interest today, especially amongst academics who consider religious pluralism to be a good thing, to develop theories regarding

ways and means to bring about interreligious dialogue which may lead, in time, to new disclosures instrumental in the mutual transformation of the dialogue-partners. I find some of these theories, including the one presented by David Tracy, to be interesting and thought-provoking. They certainly provide a way to enter the complex arena of interreligious discourse, but it is important, in my opinion, to recognize that no single theory can encompass the diversity or complexity of actual human interaction. Therefore, while it is necessary, when one embarks upon the journey which may lead to significant communication between human beings, to have a set of guidelines or methodology, to set one's course by, it is also necessary to know that each dialogue is, in a sense, unique, and develops (if it develops at all) not so much in accordance with predetermined theories as with its own inner exigencies.

I do not find theorizing or strategizing *about* dialogue and being in dialogue to be at all the same thing. In fact I have known a number of persons (mostly academics) who have a special interest in engaging in what I call "dialogue from above" but find real-life dialogue or "dialogue from below" quite uninteresting. As an academic I too started on my journey into the many-faceted, many-layered realm of interreligious dialogue armed with "a decalogue of dialogue" and a host of academic assumptions about how dialogue could or should happen. It took me several years of intensive and extensive interaction with dialogue-partners living in five continents to learn to understand the value of what may be called "the dialogue of life." The dialogue of life which emerges out of the processes of life is not a contrived matter. It arises "naturally" as it were from the interaction, positive and negative, obvious and subtle, verbal and nonverbal, between various peoples or persons. This dialogue is not the sort of dialogue we talk about in academic meetings because this dialogue proceeds not in accordance with rationally debated, mutually-agreed upon criteria/guidelines/strategies for dialogue, but in accordance with the life-perceptions and existential needs of those who generate this dialogue. In today's world many theologians realize the need for making "theology from above" coalesce with "theology from below" to create a theology which impacts on pragmatic reality. Likewise, there is great need, I believe, to make "dialogue from above" coalesce with "dialogue from below" to create a dialogue which can effect the transformation of persons and societies.

All this is not a criticism of David Tracy's position. The method or strategy he proposes may indeed be an effective means of leading a

dialogue-oriented person toward the realization of the author's larger or deeper objectives in the area of cultural/religious interface/dialogue. But I would want to see how this method or strategy works in a concrete instance, in Christian-Muslim interaction for example, before I can evaluate the measure of its effectiveness. I would also want to see how David Tracy maintains the distinction between "cultural" and "religious" pluralism in the context of a substantive discussion about Christian and Muslim worldviews and how his understanding of a "classic" applies to the Qur'an which Muslims believe to be the Word of God (transmitted by Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad who transmitted it without error or change to the first Muslims) and regard as *the* classic of normative Islam.

In closing, I would like to commend David Tracy for pointing out that many professed pluralists, "the vaunted defenders of difference, otherness, diversity and plurality, can become the great reductionists—reduce difference to mere similarity, reduce otherness to the same, and reduce plurality to my community of right-thinking competent critics." I see such "pluralists" as perpetrators of cultural/religious imperialism, and as a Muslim I feel called upon to register my protest against the attempts made, especially by Western Christians, to engage Muslims in "dialogue" which is reductionist in essence and actuality. In my many years of conversing with "pluralist" Christians I have met very few who are motivated to make a genuine effort to understand Islam on its own terms. Unfortunately, even today, there are many who, like Dante, see Islam as the great enemy of the world of Christendom, and reduce Muslims to cardboard figures which can be used to reinforce age-old stereotypes and prejudices. Even scholars who ought to know better persist in asking Muslims questions such as, "What is the Muslim concept of salvation?" or "What is the Muslim view of the separation of church and state?" not realizing that the framework in which "salvation," "church" and "state" function importantly is a Christian framework and that genuine pluralism prohibits asking Muslims to express the ethos of a religious tradition (which has no concept of "salvation" or "church" and which speaks of "community" rather than of "state") in terms which are alien to their frame of reference.

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