

In What Sense Can Inter-Faith Dialogue Contribute to Inter-Faith Peace?

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Abstract

“No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.” This famous statement by the Swiss theologian Hans Küng (1928–2021) has been met with both enthusiastic approval and critical scepticism. The paper inquires into the complex connection between religious conflict potential, identity constructs, in-group out-group mechanisms and interreligious peace. It suggests that while there is no guarantee, an open-minded theological dialogue has the potential to overcome reciprocal negative biases, may induce a new understanding of religious identity and can transform universalist claims. Although peace is not its primary goal, dialogue can nevertheless make a genuine contribution to it.

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*No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.*¹

This is the famous mantra that the internationally renowned Swiss theologian Hans Küng has sent around the world in many of his publications. He even presented it to the General Assembly of the United Nations in November 2001, two months after the events of 9/11.² In these two lines, Küng makes two important points: *First*, that peace or conflicts between religions have an impact on civil peace. And *second*, that interreligious dialogue is an essential requirement for the resolution of interreligious conflicts and for the establishment of interreligious peace.³ In what follows, I take Küng's position as the starting point for an analytical and comparative reflection on the connection between religion and violence in order to better understand whether—and if so in what sense—inter-faith dialogue can contribute to domesticating or even overcoming religious conflict-potential.

Let me begin by briefly considering Küng's first point.

¹ Used, with some variations, in several publications, e.g. Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), vi.

² Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube* [What I Believe] (München: Piper, 2009), 297. Küng's position also found its way into one of the Chinese textbooks of Peace Studies. See Liu Cheng and Egon Spiegel, *Peacebuilding in a Globalized World: An Illustrated Introduction to Peace Studies* [*Quanqiuhua shijie de heping jianshe: Tujie heping xue* 全球化世界的和平建設：圖解和平學] (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2015), 392–93.

³ In the present paper, I explore further some of the issues treated in my work: *Transformation by Integration: How Inter-faith Encounter Changes Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2009), especially in chapters 1 and 2. See also the Chinese edition: *Tongguo zhenghe zouxiang zhuanhua: Xinyangjian xiangyu ruhe zhuanbian Jidujiao* 通過整合走向轉化：信仰間相遇如何轉變基督教, trans. Wang Rong 王蓉 and Ke Jinhua 柯進華 (Beijing: Religious Culture Publishing House, 2017).

1. RELIGION AND CIVIL PEACE

Political conflicts can assume numerous and rather diverse forms: conflicts over territory, conflicts as part of imperialist or colonialist expansion, conflicts over resources, over economic, national, ethnic or cultural interests, and so on. Moreover, violent conflicts do not only arise between nations but also within nations, such as civil wars, uprisings, revolutions, coup d'états, resistance against suppression, separatist wars, etc. Usually, conflicts do not have just one reason but emerge from a conglomerate of several factors. Hence there is hardly any example in human history of a violent conflict or war that arose entirely from religious motivations. However, many conflicts on earth in past and present have a religious component. Elizabeth Harris is right in saying: "Religion is rarely the root cause of conflict [...]. Yet religion is not innocent in global conflicts."⁴

One standard response to this undisputable fact—a response often heard from religious leaders—is that whenever religions are involved in violent conflicts, religions are instrumentalized and misused for non-religious purposes. This response presupposes that any reason produced for instigating, motivating, or merely justifying violent action cannot be, by definition, a truly religious reason. In other words, this response contends that religions, in their real nature, are always peaceful. This claim, however, is hardly convincing. How could any political leader who wished to instigate or fuel a violent conflict think of instrumentalizing religion if religion were by nature peaceful? If someone wishes to burn down one's neighbour's house, the person will use petrol, not water. If religions were like water, if they were through and through peaceful, no one could misuse them for the aggravation of non-religious conflicts. The assumptions that the involvement of religion in violent conflicts is always a case of misuse is therefore self-refuting. The claim itself presupposes that religions possess a certain conflict potential which can be instrumentalized. Arguing that any conflict potential within religions is alien to their true nature or essence

⁴ Elizabeth J. Harris, "Utilizing the Theology of Religions and Human Geography to Understand the Spatial Dimension of Religion and Conflict," *Religions* 13, no. 496 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060496>, 1.

by definition seems to be a rather arbitrary and cheap form of apologetics.

When I once discussed this issue with a colleague, the person produced an interesting objection. She defended the assumption of religious innocence by comparing the misuse of religion to the sexual abuse of children. It would be clearly wrong to conclude from the fact that children are abused by sex offenders that there is something wrong with the children. But can this really be taken as an analogy to the instrumentalization of religions? In that case, one would have to assume that all those who do use religion for the aggravation of conflicts distort the true nature of religion. Not only those politicians who employ religious reasons for their power interests but also the representatives and adherents of religions who produce *religious reasons* in order to justify and support the use of violence. According to the standard defence, they would have a distorted view of the nature of religion. But is this plausible? Look, for example, at Christianity. Would it be plausible to say that theologians such as Augustin, Thomas Aquinas, Bernhard of Clairvaux, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Paul Tillich all misunderstood Christianity because they justified the use of violence under certain circumstances stating religions reasons? To be sure, there have been some consistent pacifists and committed defenders of non-violence in all religions.⁵ But if we take an unbiased look at the history of religious traditions, we will end up with a very long list of prominent voices and highly influential scriptures endorsing the use of violence by offering religious arguments. The position that religion is essentially peaceful, and that whenever it turns violent it is not true religion, is in the end tautological. Religion is simply defined as being peaceful, and if it is not peaceful, then it is declared not to be true religion.

Making such an arbitrary claim can be well-meaning. But it may also function as a protection against a critical or self-critical analysis of religion. However, such analysis, I suggest, is much needed. There is a public and a religious (i.e. “theological”) need to investigate which

⁵ A number of people with pacifist inclinations from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are portrayed in Hagen Berndt, *Non-Violence in the World Religions: Vision and Reality* (London: SCM Press, 2000). For overviews on religious rejections and endorsements of violence, see the chapters in Perry Schmidt-Leukel, ed., *War and Peace in World Religions*, The Gerald Weisfeld Lectures 2003 (London: SCM Press, 2004).

factors constitute a genuinely religious conflict potential.⁶ I too believe that religions are indeed quite often instrumentalized to fuel conflicts that are primarily motivated by non-religious reasons. But as I just argued, this is only possible because there exists a genuine religious potential for conflict and even violent conflict. If we form a clearer idea of the nature of that conflict potential, we are also in a better position to address the question of interreligious conflicts. Plus, of course, the subsequent question of whether dialogue between religions can make a serious contribution to interreligious peace and, if so, what kind of contribution. Avoiding such critical inquiry by simply defining “religion” as peaceful will not be helpful in understanding the role of religions in conflicts and hence will not help in finding constructive solutions. I thus agree with Hector Avalos that a better understanding of religious violence can only be achieved if we critically “address the deeply entrenched view that ‘true’ religion is primarily designed for peaceful and altruistic purposes.”⁷ Yet as I will contend in the further explication of my argument, what makes things more complicated is that religions often justify violence as something that *is* ultimately serving some altruistic purposes.

⁶ Especially in the wake of 9/11 there has been a growing number of publications on the reasons of religious violence. To mention just a few: Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd revised and updated ed. (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 2003); Paul Robinson, ed., *Just War in Comparative Perspective* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Martin E. Marty, *When Faiths Collide* (Malden / Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Hector Avalos, *Fighting Worlds: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005); Arvind Sharma, ed., *The World's Religions after September 11*, vol. 1: *Religion, War, and Peace* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2009); two titles edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson: *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Violence and the World's Religious Traditions: An Introduction* (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), etc.

⁷ Avalos, *Fighting Worlds*, 87. I do not agree, however, with Avalos' conclusions. He runs into a similar pitfall as many religious argumentations. Because he sees a violent potential in all religions, he develops a moral argument for an antireligious policy that in the end will endorse the use of force against all religions. See *ibid.*, 359–89.

2. RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

When we analyse religious justifications of violence, it seems to make sense to distinguish between *religiously endorsed violence* and *religiously motivated violence*.

Whenever a religious tradition within a certain society becomes a strong and influential cultural and social factor, it sooner or later will be confronted with the question of which kind of force or violence may be permitted or even regarded as inevitable in order to protect the society against greater evils. Violence that is justified by religious reasoning in response to this question can be called *religiously endorsed violence*. Three classic topics of such reasoning are the use of force to keep up social order and enforce the law, the use of force to defend the country against external or internal threats and the use of force to remove unbearable forms of tyranny. It is important to note that in such cases, force and violence are justified in order to defend and to implement a peaceful, safe and regulated cohabitation within a certain territory. In the end, such values are centred on the protection and fostering of *biological and social well-being*. Religions usually share such values, which is why they are able to justify and endorse the use of force or violence along such lines from within their own doctrinal perspectives.⁸ Yet what is important to see is that in this type of reasoning religious thinkers endorse the use of force or violence because of natural or social values that are not specifically or exclusively religious values. Similar justifications of violence can therefore also be produced by non-religious argumentations.

Religious values in a more specific sense usually go beyond biological and social well-being toward what might be called *ultimate well-being*. Social order is then seen as embedded in some cosmological or metaphysical order and worldly well-being is superseded by trans-worldly well-being which often assumes an eschatological form. Trans-worldly well-being is considered as more important than this-worldly well-being. Social order must therefore be subservient to and reflective of the cosmological order. This has important implications: If the use of force and violence is justified in pursuit of biologi-

⁸ For an overview on just war thinking in various religious traditions, see Robinson, *Just War in Comparative Perspective*, 2003.

cal and social well-being, it will be even more justified in terms of serving ultimate well-being. Violence with this type of endorsement or justification can be called *religiously motivated violence*. It is bound to specific beliefs about ultimate well-being and closely connected to cosmological, metaphysical, and eschatological ideas.

In the major religious traditions, beliefs about what constitutes cosmological order and ultimate well-being are backed up by certain authorities, that is by scriptural and institutional authorities or simply by the authority of tradition. The final source of such authorities is seen in an ultimate reality of either an impersonal nature, such as Dharma, Tai-ji, Dao or Brahman, or of a personal nature, such as the Gods of the theistic traditions. Therefore, religious violence is often legitimized by the claim that in some situations such violence is simply commanded or demanded by the Ultimate. It can be presented as the will of God or as the necessary implication of the highest law or force. In such cases, the insistence on obedience is sometimes based on nothing but an appeal to authority. In this respect, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) has a point when he says: “In faith there lies a pernicious principle.”⁹

However, as far as I can see, the major religious traditions tend to support the appeal to ultimate authority with additional rationalizations that turn religious violence into a *moral* obligation. The use of violence is then explained in basically two ways. The first way is to present violence as *defensive*. It is justified as necessary for the protection and defence of the means, institutions and traditions connected to ultimate well-being. The second way is more *interventive*. In such cases the use of violence is justified as an act of actively doing people a service by spreading and implementing whatever is meant to help their ultimate well-being. A classical analogy, frequently used in several religious traditions, is that of a painful medical treatment. Sometimes the good physician needs to use painful means, but he does so for the greater benefit of the patient. In a similar way, the use of religious violence can be justified as inevitable in leading people to ultimate well-being. A clear example of this kind of rationalization is the religious justification of violence in connection with missionary purposes. Such violence prepares the way for doing other people an ultimate favour by bringing them the true religion, that is the true way of living in harmony with the ultimate. For example, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic theologian Philip Englert justified Western colonialist

⁹ See my discussion in Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration*, 16–24 (Chinese version: Schmidt-Leukel, *Tongguo zhenghe zouxiang zhuanhua*, 6–15).

expansion by the argument that some civilizations are so much lost in religious darkness that the message of the cross can only be brought to them if it is preceded by the sword.¹⁰

In the light of such rationalizations, we can discern one crucial problem of religiously motivated violence. The religious perpetrator may be subjectively fully convinced that he or she is doing something morally right. Even gruesome forms of violence may be committed without any bad conscience but with the inner conviction to do something that is ultimately good. As the physicist and Noble Prize laureate Steven Weinberg once put it: “Good people will do good things, and bad people will do bad things. But for good people to do bad things—that takes religion.”¹¹

According to the Egyptologist Jan Assmann the root of religious violence lies in “the distinction between true and false in religion.”¹² This distinction, says Assmann, “construct[s] a universe that is not only full of meaning, identity, and orientation, but also full of conflict, intolerance, and violence.”¹³ According to Assmann, this distinction is causally connected to monotheism. He calls it the “Mosaic distinction” because he symbolically links monotheism to the biblical figure of Moses. Assmann claims, that the distinction between truth and falsity in religion “simply did not exist in the world of polytheistic religions.”¹⁴ In contrast, monotheism would establish itself inevitably as “counter-religion,” as an antagonism to all other religions which monotheists would reject as “paganism.” That is, one’s own religion is associated with truth and the religious “other” with falsity.

Assmann’s thesis is actually not that new. It was already presented 250 years ago by David Hume in his *The Natural History of Religions* (§9). Yet despite such a prominent forerunner, Assmann’s thesis is only half true. I agree with Assmann’s view that religious violence has much to do with “the distinction between truth and falsity in religions.” Yet I contest his statement that this distinction is peculiar to monotheism.

¹⁰ Winfried Philipp Englert, *Christus und Buddha in ihrem himmlischen Vorleben* [Christ and Buddha in their Celestial Pre-existence] (Vienna: Verlag von Mayer, 1898), 123.

¹¹ As quoted in Nancy K. Frankenberg, ed., *The Faith of Scientists in Their Own Words* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 389.

¹² Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

The justification of violence either against the external or the internal religious “other” is also found in polytheistic or non-theistic religions such as in certain strands of Hinduism, Buddhism, or Chinese traditions. Here, too, such justification is based on the assumption that the beliefs and practices of the religious “other” are either false or at least less true than those of one’s own sect.¹⁵ During Chinese history, especially in the first millennium CE, severe and violent conflicts arose between Confucians, Daoists, and Buddhists, which had rival truth claims at least as a significant ingredient. Today we find conflicts, even violent conflicts, between Buddhists and Hindus,¹⁶ Hindus and Muslims,¹⁷ Buddhists and Muslims,¹⁸ Hindus and Christians,¹⁹ Buddhists and Christians,²⁰ Christians and Muslims²¹ and between different branches or versions within those traditions²² in a number of places.²³ So while Assmann is wrong in identifying monotheism as the central problem, he is right in pointing to the issue of religious claims to a superior or even exclusive possession of that truth which is connected to ultimate well-being. At least, this is a significant part of the problem. For one should not forget that religion is hardly ever the only factor in a larger conflict.

2. THE ISSUE OF IDENTITY

Religiously motivated violence is often directed against other religions or, more precisely, against the religious “other.” The religious other can be external or internal. That is, the “other” can be a different religious tradition or a different version of one’s own tradition: a different school, denomination, doctrinal position, sectarian, schismatic, etc. The

¹⁵ See also Perry Schmidt-Leukel, “Why We Need an Engaged Interreligious Theology,” *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 2, no. 2 (2018): 131–40.

¹⁶ E.g. Sri Lanka.

¹⁷ E.g. India.

¹⁸ E.g. Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand.

¹⁹ E.g. India or Nepal.

²⁰ E.g. Korea.

²¹ E.g. Indonesia.

²² E.g. the constant tension and fighting between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims.

²³ See also John D’Arcy May, *Pluralism and Peace: The Religions in Global Civil Society* (Bayswater, VIC: Coventry Press, 2019), 171–77.

demarcation between “others” and “us” alerts us to the connection between the religious conflict potential and the complex issue of religious identity. This connection is astonishingly under-researched despite the fact of its central role in so many conflicts. To mention just one drastic example, I would like to quote the Muslim sociologist Hasan Askari (1932–2008). Born in India, Askari became a witness of the reciprocal atrocities between Muslims and Hindus which accompanied the partition of India and Pakistan and may have claimed about one million lives. He writes:

... those who had been neighbours for generations became, overnight, aliens and enemies and what followed on the eve of the partition of India and afterwards was so baffling and heart-rending that many were compelled to question their very humanity, whether it really existed, and how was it that our religious heritage, in spite of its towering claims to moral and spiritual truths, was unable to prevent us from behaving as beasts, thirsty of one another’s blood, and all in the name of this or that “religious” identity.²⁴

More recently, Paul Hedges has provided some helpful considerations by analysing interreligious conflicts in terms of social identity theory.²⁵ The religious perception and—in a sense—construction of the religious “other” has much to do with the well-known psychological mechanisms of in-group-out-group relations. Individual identity is always multi-layered and in significant parts dependent on the relation between the individual and various groups. Yet groups too, construct their identity and they do so in relation not only to their individual members but also in relation to other groups, that is to “out-groups.” As Hedges points out, psychological research has demonstrated that individuals develop a sort of natural bias to favour their in-group and entertain negative prejudices towards the out-group.²⁶ This phenomenon in itself has nothing to do with religion, but it will immediately acquire a religious character if in-groups and out-groups are defined in terms of

²⁴ Hasan Askari, *Spiritual Quest: An Inter-Religious Dimension* (Pudsey: Seven Mirrors, 1991), 120.

²⁵ Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 140–62, and, applied to specific situations of “religious hatred,” Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context* (London / New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

²⁶ Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 147, 150, 153.

different religious belongings. In such a case, religious views have the potential to significantly increase negative biases.

Already in the 1990s a multireligious working-group examining the roots of interreligious conflicts has emphasized the connection between religious identity formation, in-group-out-group mechanisms and the development of negative biases:

Religions provide individuals and groups with a sense of identity, a place in the universe, oriented to some notion of a special reality, truth, or authority considered ultimate in some sense. In so doing, they foster a sense of group feeling that motivates not only behavior important to personal and social integration (cooperation, sharing, mutual respect, altruism) but also behavior that draws lines between an “us” (the in-group), who have the truth, know the good, and live rightly; and “them” (the out-group), who do not share these characteristics, or at least not fully.²⁷

As Hedges notes, psychological research has also shown that along such lines the out-group may easily be perceived as a threat to one’s in-group and hence to one’s identity. To the extent that religions reinforce the tendency of negative perceptions of the out-group, the feeling of a potential threat will also be increased. This will be especially the case, if the religious others—their beliefs, values and practices—are not merely seen as false, but also in a religious sense as unwholesome or even as evil, that is, when the religious other is literally demonized.²⁸ It is evident that mutual perceptions of a reciprocal threat will significantly increase the conflict potential, that is, the willingness to defend one’s identity against the imagined or real threat.

Seeing the religious other as threatening may be unfounded, but it may also be quite reasonable. Especially if religions cultivate the wish to replace other religions by establishing and spreading their own religion, the threat is very real. This takes us to the important dimension of space. The wish to *re-place* each other implies a spatial dimension. The

²⁷ Sumner B. Twiss, “Religion and Human Rights: A Comparative Perspective,” in *Explorations in Global Ethics*, ed. Sumner B. Twiss and Bruce Grelle (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 156.

²⁸ For a case study on the Buddhist demonization of “others” by means of the Māra narrative, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, “The Demonization of the Other through the Narrative of Māra’s Defeat (māravijaya),” in *Buddhism and Its Religious Others: Historical Encounters and Representations*, Proceedings of the British Academy 243, ed. Christopher Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 155–75.

just cited interreligious working group from the 1990s continued their analysis by stating:

... add to this felt sense of group difference and superiority the fact that many religions' sense of place in the universe is also bound up with proprietary claims to a certain territory that they feel they ought to control according to their views of the world, and the result is a considerable potential for violence and abuse against any out-group that challenges the in-group about its worldview, territory, values, or way of life.²⁹

With the identity aspect and its spatial dimension, the two lines of religiously endorsed and religiously motivated violence converge. National, ethnic, or local identity issues merge with issues of religious identity.³⁰ And the conflict about some jointly inhabited territory will assume the nature of a conflict over "mythical space," that is, a clash of rival claims regarding the correct metaphysical or cosmological interpretation of reality, materializing as conflicting claims about the religious significance and corresponding governance of certain territories. Conflicts over Israel, Kashmir or Sri Lanka may serve as fairly evident illustrations. As Elizabeth Harris has shown by her case studies, this mechanism can be clearly discerned in what may prima facie look merely like political conflicts over territorial interests.³¹ I fully agree with her that in such situations political solutions alone may not fully settle the problem. They are certainly important but need to be accompanied by religious or theological solutions.³²

Regarding the role of religious identity in religious conflict-potential, Wilfred Cantwell Smith has described the roadmap as a transition from a "we-they" paradigm, that is, from the awareness of "us" versus "them," to an understanding of the world as a space "in which some of us are Christians, some of us are Muslims, some of us are Hindus, some of us are Jews, some of us are sceptics; and where all

²⁹ Twiss, "Religion and Human Rights," 156.

³⁰ Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 358.

³¹ Elizabeth J. Harris, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism: A Spatial Perspective," in *Twenty First Century Theologies of Religion: Retrospection and Future Prospects*, ed. Elizabeth J. Harris, Paul Hedges and Shantikumar Hettiarachchi (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2016), 57–75; Elizabeth J. Harris, *Religion, Space and Conflict in Sri Lanka: Colonial and Postcolonial Contexts* (London / New York: Routledge, 2018); Harris, "Utilizing the Theology of Religions."

³² Harris, "Utilizing the Theology of Religions," 12.

of us are, and recognise each other being, rational men and women.”³³ That is, the identity construction along the lines of the we-they pattern, the in-group out-group paradigm, should be transformed into the identity of an encompassing “we,” a broad in-group with sufficient space for internal diversity. According to Smith, the way to this goal is the way of dialogue—a dialogue in which “‘we’ talk *with* ‘you,’” culminating in a global colloquy where “‘we all’ are talking *with* each other about ‘us.’”³⁴

So are Smith and Küng right in that dialogue is the way to combat the religious conflict potential? This has been seriously contested.

4. MAY DIALOGUE HELP?

Against Hans Küng’s dictum, the Roman-Catholic philosopher Robert Spaemann has produced three interrelated objections: *First*, in the past, some intensive religious dialogues have culminated in massive religious conflicts such as the confessional wars in Europe. *Second*, serious interreligious dialogue always implies the danger of a clash that would have never occurred without such dialogues. Being ready for serious dialogue therefore requires the readiness to put civil peace at risk. *Third*, an element of disagreement (and hence the danger of a clash) is inevitably part of any serious dialogue between universalist religions because their universalist beliefs are incompatible. The price for avoiding such disagreement would imply the surrender of their universalism which will be synonymous to self-abandonment.³⁵

Spaemann’s critique can be helpful in clarifying the role and peace-potential of interreligious dialogue. His example of the theological controversies during the sixteenth century in Europe as culminating in the thirty-year war triggers the question of whether such controversies should really be called “dialogues.” Does “dialogue” comprise any form of interreligious conversation? Or should dialogue be qualified in some specific ways? In an important document from

³³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 101.

³⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Religious Diversity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 142.

³⁵ Robert Spaemann, “Weltethos als ‘Projekt’” [Global Ethics as a ‘Project’], *Merkur* 570 (1996): 897–98.

1984³⁶ the Roman-Catholic Church distinguished four different forms of dialogue: (1) The “dialogue of life,” often called “grassroot-dialogue,” that is, the dialogue lived on a day-to-day basis as an encounter between neighbours of different faiths. (2) The “dialogue of deeds” designating the active collaboration between people of different faiths for the greater social good, the welfare of all, including the promotion and defence of “social justice, moral values, peace and liberty.”³⁷ (3) The “dialogue of specialists,” that is the dialogue between experts of different religious traditions. In this dialogue “the partners come to mutual understanding and appreciation of each other’s spiritual values and cultural categories and promote communion and fellowship among people.”³⁸ (4) The “dialogue of religious experience.” Here “persons rooted in their own religious traditions can share their experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith, and duty, as well as their expressions and ways of searching for the Absolute. This type of dialogue can be a mutual enrichment [...]”³⁹ Since the publication of this document, its distinction of four forms of dialogue has spread widely and far beyond the Catholic Church.⁴⁰ More recently Marianne Moyaert added to these the form of “diplomatic dialogue.”⁴¹ She uses this term for meetings between religious leaders and representatives of religious institutions and emphasizes the “symbolic importance of this form of dialogue.” It “implies the willingness of religious leaders and their institutions to leave centuries-old hostility behind them” and to send out the “powerful signal” that “strong faith convictions should not lead to interreligious animosity.”⁴²

³⁶ The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions. Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission, see Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, accessed December 2023, <https://www.dicasteryinterreligious.va/dialogue-and-mission-1984/>.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 34.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 35.

⁴⁰ It has a certain forerunner in Eric Sharp’s distinction between (1) discursive dialogue, (2) human dialogue, (3) secular dialogue, (4) interior dialogue. See Eric J. Sharpe, “The Goals of Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Truth and Dialogue: The Relationship between World Religions*, ed. John Hick (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), 77–95.

⁴¹ Marianne Moyaert, *Interreligious Dialogue: In Understanding Interreligious Relations*, ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 202–4, perhaps indebted to what Eck called “parliamentary” and “institutional dialogue.” Diana Eck, “What do we mean by ‘Dialogue?’” *Current Dialogue* 11 (1986): 5–15.

⁴² Moyaert, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 204.

But what qualifies “dialogue” in its different forms against other forms of communication? The just cited Roman-Catholic document suggests an interesting answer. Drawing on the findings of “the human sciences” it states that

... in interpersonal dialogue one experiences one’s own limitations as well as the possibility of overcoming them. A person discovers that he does not possess the truth in a perfect and total way but can walk together with others towards that goal. Mutual affirmation, reciprocal correction, and fraternal exchange lead the partners in dialogue to an ever greater maturity which in turn generates interpersonal communion.⁴³

Experiencing one’s own limitations regarding the possession of truth and walking together with the religious other towards a fuller and more mature understanding of truth would obviously exclude polemical or apologetic controversy. Perhaps we can say that while controversy looks at the other’s religion with the intention of identifying its weaknesses in order to demonstrate the superiority of one’s own belief, dialogue seeks out the strengths in the other’s religion in order to learn from it.⁴⁴ In a similar vein, Catherine Cornille has identified certain presuppositions that make such dialogue possible.⁴⁵ Among these are what she calls “humility” and “hospitality.” That is, the “humble recognition of the constant limitation and therefore endless perfectibility of one’s own religious understanding of truth”⁴⁶ and the “openness toward the possibility of discovering truth in teachings and practices different from one’s own.”⁴⁷

Taking up Spaemann’s historical example, one can illustrate the difference between controversy and dialogue by comparing the controversies of the Reformation era with the dialogical efforts of the

⁴³ The Attitude of the Church, no. 21.

⁴⁴ For a similar suggestion, see Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 3–4, 41–46. On such an understanding of “dialogue” much of what is reported in the different case studies in Catherine Cornille, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 185–478, would not qualify as “dialogue” but would better fit into the category of “controversies.”

⁴⁵ Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2008).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

twentieth century to better understand the various confessional standpoints regarding the doctrine of justification. These efforts led to a significant modification and even official revocation of the former reciprocal condemnations.⁴⁸ If we understand dialogue in this way, religious controversies culminating in wars can hardly be qualified as “dialogue.” But am I now making the same kind of mistake as those who defend “true” religion as being always innocent? Am I saying that dialogue will always lead to peace because any form of dialogue that does not lead to peace is by definition not “true” dialogue? I do not think so. My point is rather that dialogue in the way just characterized has a strong potential for peace—but there is no guarantee. Let me explain.

Must dialogue, as Spaemann says, be open to disagreement and even ready to put civil peace at risk? The answer to the first part of the question is a clear and unambiguous “yes.” Dialogue that seeks a better understanding cannot preclude the possibility of identifying serious disagreements. Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010), one of the Christian pioneers in inter-faith dialogue, suggested that true understanding between people of different faiths would require that they finally share their convictions. Regarding each other’s faith as false would demonstrate a lack of reciprocal understanding.⁴⁹ I agree with Panikkar only in as much as the attempt to understand the other implies the effort to see through the other’s eyes. In contrast to Panikkar, however, I do not hold that seeing through the other’s eyes requires a full assent to the other’s view. In this respect I follow Wilfred Cantwell Smith who held that I understand the other if I understand the reasons behind the other’s view.⁵⁰ But I do not have to share those reasons nor the consequences that the other may draw from them. Therefore, dialogue seeking understanding needs to be open to the possibility of disagreement. This, however, may not necessarily mean the end of dialogue and the beginning of war. So, in response to the question of whether dialogue needs to be ready to put civil peace at risk, I would point out that in case of identifying serious religious disagreements, all partners in dia-

⁴⁸ For the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) and the further development, see Lutheran World Federation (LWF), accessed December 2023, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/what-we-do/unity-church/joint-declaration-doctrine-justification-jddj>.

⁴⁹ E.g. Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 9.

⁵⁰ See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Culture from a Comparative Perspective*, ed. John W. Burbidge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 133f.

logue may continue to further explore their disagreements in order to arrive at a more differentiated understanding and assessment. For, in the same way that dialogue should be open to disagreement, it should also be open to possible and perhaps unexpected agreement. Dialogue may very well lead to the discovery and affirmation of significant truth on the side of the religious other, which will automatically result in appreciation.

Yet, will dialogue that culminates in reciprocal appreciation be suicidal for universalist religions, as Spaemann suggests? This depends on how one understands this universalist dimension. Take, for example, the universalist claim, found in several theistic religions, that God is the God of all human beings. This can be understood in two very different ways. In one way, God is seen as the God of all human beings only *de iure* but not *de facto*. Hence, the supposedly true God of one's own religion needs to be made the God of all. In that sense, the universalist claim that God is the God of all actually means that a tribal deity should *become* the universal God. The alternative way consists in understanding the universality of God *de facto*, that is, as something already given. The task will therefore be to discover the presence of God among all. The same distinction can also be applied to impersonal understandings of ultimate reality. Here too the question is whether the respective universality is something to be induced or something to be discovered. A universalism in the second sense precludes any *a priori* judgement about the ultimate compatibility or incompatibility of universalist claims. It will be, in principle, compatible with the new form of religious identity that Smith characterizes as a "some of us" consciousness. If dialogue leads to mutual appreciation, dialogue will work as an affirmation of this type of universalism. Moreover, dialogue has the potential to transform the concept of universality as something to be induced into something to be discovered. Such transformation must not be discredited as religious self-abandonment.

5. CONCLUSIONS

If interreligious dialogue leads to reciprocal appreciation between dialogue partners, they will no longer perceive each other as threats nor harbour any longer the wish to replace one another. Hence the religious conflict potential will be significantly reduced. The dangers connected

to the in-group out-group mechanism will be reduced if religious identities are reconstructed by the awareness of belonging to a larger in-group in which “some of us” are Buddhists, Daoist, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Jews, etc.⁵¹

If interreligious dialogue leads to the discernment of serious disagreements, there are still two complementary options: First, the continuation of dialogue towards a deeper and more differentiated understanding of the disagreement. And second, the practice of tolerance in its original meaning. That is, a toleration or endurance of what one deems to be wrong. “Tolerance” is thus different from “appreciation.” I do not need to tolerate what I appreciate. Tolerance is needed precisely for those beliefs and practices that I cannot appreciate. Hence there have to be limits of tolerance. Something wrong can become so bad that its toleration can no longer be justified. But the spirit of tolerance is to keep such limits as wide as possible. Interreligious tolerance, however, does not remove the religious conflict-potential. It is rather a way of managing and controlling it. It will be one of the tasks of “diplomatic dialogue” to sustain a climate of tolerance and to do so in a way that always remains open for moving beyond toleration towards appreciation.

Peace among the religions is certainly one of the prior goals of religious tolerance. But as said, tolerance attains peace only by controlling the religious conflict-potential, not by removing it. The roots of the interreligious conflict-potential are overcome through reciprocal appreciation. Such appreciation may possibly be achieved by a dialogue in search of truth and deeper understanding. In contrast to tolerance, peace is not the priority of this form of dialogue. Its primary goal is the achievement of a better understanding of the nature of religious diversity. Although it is not certain that this effort will lead to peace, it is nevertheless a promising prospect. Perhaps we may draw here on the ancient Chinese distinction between “inner” and “outer.” Outer peace among the religions will be pursued by the practice of tolerance and the

⁵¹ For two recent case studies from Ghana, Nigeria and from Myanmar showing how such a transformed religious self-understanding could positively impact a highly conflictual situation, see Patricia Enedudu Idoko, “Islamic Religious Education Textbooks in a Pluralist Nigeria,” *Religions* 14 (2023): 42, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010042>; and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, “Reflections on Religion and Identity: With a Particular Emphasis on Theravāda-Buddhism,” in *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities*, paperback ed., ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Hans-Peter Grosshans, and Madlen Krueger (London / New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 108–21.

wisdom of interreligious diplomacy.⁵² Inner peace would mean that religions are at peace with the existence of other religions. That they understand religious diversity as a religious value, as a true benefit and real enrichment. This applies to both, the diversity of religious traditions and the diversity within each religious tradition. Both, as I have tried to show, actually mirror each other.⁵³ The achievement of inner peace in that sense would simultaneously be in service of outer peace. I think that this lesson can be learned from the Chinese history. To the extent that the concept of the “harmony of the three teachings” (*sanjiao heyi*) has been adopted by the three traditions as a religious value it has also served to sustain outer peace among them.

But let us be realistic: Not everybody will be ready for doctrinal humility and hospitality. That is, not everybody will be ready to concede one’s limitations or the limitations of one’s religious traditions when it comes to the question of religious truth. Not everybody will be open to the idea of interreligious dialogue along these lines. Its growth may take a long time. Hence, the call for such dialogue remains to be important as much as the insight that on it rests the vision of an inner peace among the religions.

⁵² For a broad range of case studies along the lines of a diplomatic dialogue in situations of religious, political, and social conflicts, see Markus A. Weingardt, *Religion Macht Frieden: Das Friedenspotential von Religionen in politischen Gewaltkonflikten* [Religion Power/Making Peace: The Peace Potential of Religions in Violent Political Conflicts] (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007).

⁵³ For the suggestion of a typological similarity between interreligious and intrareligious diversity, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, The Gifford Lectures—An Extended Tradition (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), Chinese translation in preparation; and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *To See a World in a Flower: A Fractal Interpretation of the Relation between Buddhism and Christianity* [*Yi hua yi shijie: Fenxing lilun shijiao xia de Fo Ye duihua* 一花一世界：分形理論視角下的佛耶對話], trans. Zhang Xuliang and Wang Rong (Beijing: Religious Culture Publishing House, 2020).