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Christian–Muslim Dialogue in Roman Catholic Perspective: Terminology, Theology, Methodology

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Christian–Muslim dialogue and missionary theology from a Roman Catholic perspective. It argues that many objections both to interreligious dialogue and to Christian mission are based on misunderstandings of these concepts. The article clarifies six such misunderstandings, before exploring the relationship between evangelization, dialogue, mission, testimony, and proclamation. Drawing on biblical sources, magisterial documents, and theological reflection, it proposes a framework in which dialogue is understood as an essential dimension of Christian witness rather than an alternative to mission. The study concludes by outlining methodological principles for a new "interactive" Christian–Muslim theological engagement.

Keywords: Christian–Muslim dialogue; interreligious dialogue; mission; evangelization; witness; proclamation; Catholic theology; theology of religions

1. Introduction

The following lines offer a Roman Catholic perspective on Christian–Muslim dialogue and the place of interreligious dialogue within the Church's mission. The reflection should begin with a study of the relevant vocabulary. Four key words are regularly used to describe the propagation of the Christian faith: 'mission,' 'proclamation,' 'evangelization,' and 'testimony.' All four are already part of New Testament vocabulary. The respective verbs used in the gospel are "to send": *apostellein*, "to herald": *kēryssein*, "to announce the good news": *euangelizesthai*, *and* "to witness": *martyrein*/*diamartyresthai*. Even at that early stage these words may already have functioned almost as technical terms: it seems that they were used to determine how the gospel should be communicated.[1] In the 20th century, the Church's reflection on how to witness to the coming of God's Kingdom has added a new concept. It was in 1964 that Roman Catholicism introduced a fifth key term that would shape Christian relations with others, namely, 'dialogue.'

It is true that 'dialogue' has now come to mean commitment to a specific activity, the commitment to interreligious encounters (Second Vatican Council 1965d, #2).[2] But "dialogue" was also understood as something more than a particular ecclesial endeavour. It was meant to designate, define and determine a "form of relationship" (Paul VI 1964, #78),[3] an atmosphere: "the climate of dialogue is friendship, indeed service" (#87). That, however, was bound to raise objections. If Christians have already discovered Christ, "in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3), why should they need to listen to the voices and hearts of others (Paul VI 1964, #87)? Why would someone who takes Jesus' command to make all nations his disciples seriously[4] sacrifice time and credibility by engaging in dialogue with non-Christians? To a large extent, such doubts are based on misunderstandings. We must identify and discuss them.

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However, the contrary objection should also be mentioned: how can a loving disciple of Christ set out to convert others when the Master seems to have taught humility and harmony? Didn't Jesus say that "whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40)?

Again, such objections may be based on a misconception. Therefore, following our discussion on *dialogue*, the three most significant misunderstandings surrounding the concept of *mission* must be put right. Subsequently, we must consider how evangelization, dialogue, testimony, the Church's mission, and gospel proclamation are interconnected.[5]

2. Dialogue: Three Misunderstandings

2.1. The Aim of Christian–Muslim Dialogue Is Not "Ecumenism": Islam Is a Different Religion

Let us start with an example. Some Christians regard a Qur'anic text, such as Sūrat al-Fātiḥa (Sura 1), as 'good for dialogue.' By this, they may mean that since such verses sound like a psalm and thus our basic texts are so similar, we should now, in the name of dialogue, overcome the dogmatic differences separating Islam and Christianity. However, in Catholic understanding, that is not the purpose of interreligious dialogue.

Interreligious dialogue is different from ecumenical dialogue. Many ecumenists would say that today's dogmatic differences between the *Churches* were caused by different cultural contexts and we should become one body of Christian testimony again. Such dialogues may proceed using the methodology of 'differentiating consensus.' Respecting the different concerns of various Christian denominations, one can find common faith formulae and grow together without aspiring to uniformity (Meyer 2000).

An interesting similarity can be seen between this ecumenical understanding and Islam's attitude towards religious pluralism. The Qur'an suggests that interreligious friction can be overcome by recognising the shared origin of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Abraham: a figure with whom all three can agree. However, this is not the Christian agenda in interreligious dialogue. At least, official Catholic–Muslim dialogue does not seek to unite Christianity and Islam. Why not? As insurmountable obstacles to unity one could now point to the two dogmas of Christ's equal divine nature with the Father and God's Trinitarian being in the three hypostases of Father, Son and Spirit; but Christian and Muslim theologians have learned to understand these dogmas as not contradicting monotheism and sometimes even express them in ways acceptable to Muslim belief. Still a fundamental difference remains, but it needs to be expressed in a new way. For Christians, Christ himself is the definitive turning point in history: he is, for all, the key to the kingdom of God. Islam honours Christ, but not as the definitive turning point in history, not as the one way to salvation. Therefore, Christians should not attempt to create a combined Christian–Muslim faith community. The aim of Christianity's dialogue with Islam is different (below, Section 5.2.2).

2.2. The Foundation of Dialogue Is Not "Tolerance" in the Sense That States, Citizens, or Faith Communities Must Acknowledge the Truth and Profitability of Some or All Religious Traditions

Most societies today are marked by pluralism, also when it comes to religious belonging. That is to say, adherents of different faiths live together. Should governments therefore adopt a pluralist theology, holding that the various faiths present in society are equally true and good? Government should not decide on religious truth. It is not the role of a state to determine the validity or profitability of religious convictions, not even by claiming that all are equally *true*. Should then at least believers embrace a pluralist theology in the name of dialogue, in order to promote societal harmony? Faith communities and individuals may each claim that their conviction is the only true one. The state must grant them the same legal protection as those who think otherwise. States must guarantee freedom to their citizens, including freedom of religion. That freedom also allows for believers to hold an

"exclusivist" position such as considering other religious beliefs to be wrong. Citizens may hold all sorts of convictions, but they will have to live with the fact that others hold different convictions. This is precisely what tolerance means. The state, on the other hand, cannot enforce tolerance. The state must only act to protect public peace where lack of tolerance calls for violence. Citizens, on the other side, may even say that they reject other creeds, and it is perfectly acceptable for these citizens to try to convince their interlocutors of their own points of view. That goes neither against religious freedom nor against a dialogical attitude. Only, interlocutors in dialogue (interreligious or otherwise) would do well to *try to understand* what others hold.

2.3. Interfaith Dialogue Does Not Have to Seek Theological "Consensus": By Acknowledging Another Person's Views as Different, a Believer Can Find Purification and Enrichment, and Work with Others for Social Justice

The written testimony of another religious tradition can be challenging for believers. Even more challenging may be the interlocutors' living testimonies, questions, arguments, and their attempts to convince others. An atmosphere of mutual listening and benevolent hearing is conducive to real dialogue, but it is pointless to conceal differences. Pope Benedict XVI suggested that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are, for each other, "other believers," (Benedict XVI 2012b, #19) thus not only marking out difference but also their belonging together precisely for being believers. And Pope Francis once identified as the fundamental dialogical attitude "*il coraggio dell'alterità*." That is, the courage to be different and not to remain in one's own bubble because of that difference but rather to walk together with those who are different in the hope of finding a common direction; and Francis in fact also pointed towards the aim of that shared journey. This is learning to build "*la città degli uomini*—the city of humanity" (Francis 2017). Continuing this idea, we may imagine believers who live out the double courage of being different *and* walking together with those who are different on their way towards a world of more social justice, discussing what is socially just along the way. Throughout this process, the differences that arise need not be seen as frustrating obstacles to a shared life but rather as "purification and enrichment" for all who are involved (Secretariat for Non-Christians 1984, #21; Benedict XVI 2012a; Francis 2013, #250).

The aforementioned three legal and theological claims are based on what Catholic Social Doctrine refers to as the 'distinction between religion and politics' (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, #50). Distinction does not mean separation: religious preaching may inspire and criticize politics, and legitimate political measures may pose good or bad challenges for faith communities. The distinction between religion and politics allows Catholicism to hold simultaneously "that the human person has the right to religious freedom" (Second Vatican Council 1965b, #2) *and* that "salvation comes only through Christ" (Acts 4:12). This combination of liberty and challenge is based on the insight that saving faith is an inner conviction that cannot be produced through physical force.

After this explanation of some misunderstandings about interreligious dialogue, it is time to identify and discuss the three most common misunderstandings about Christian mission.

3. Mission: Three Misunderstandings

3.1. The Church's Mission Does Not Assume That Christianity "Possesses" the Truth: Rather, Christians Believe That Christ Embodies the Ultimate Truth, Whose Meaning We Are Coming to Understand Ever Better

One of the first questions Muslims typically ask about Christianity is why the New Testament contains more than one Gospel.[6] In the background of this question is the Muslim belief that each of God's envoys (*rusul*, sg. *rasūl*) received one revelatory book. Consequently,

Muslims believe that, just as Muḥammad received the Qur'an, Jesus received the book called the Gospel (*inǧīl*). Then, the question must arise: why are there four Gospels representing the message of Jesus?

Revelation, in the Christian faith, is not a "book." Rather, revelation *happens*, it happens in history, and its fulfilment is Christ. A Christian theology of history would try to envisage that all events will ultimately become visible as elements of God's salvific project (Eph 1:9–10), which is already evident in the history of Christ. The role of Scripture, by contrast, is to *bear witness* to this revelation, which is fulfilled in Christ. This witness would necessarily be expressed in various ways according to different contexts with different questions and cultural patterns. Therefore, the diversity of voices in the New Testament does not obscure the revelation of God. Viewing history from various angles makes it more tangible and vivid.

Famously, Pope Benedict XVI said that "we do not possess the truth, the truth possesses us" (Benedict XVI 2012c). That is why, from the outset, the Church had accommodated different ways of expressing the Christian faith so that no single witness or group was able to lay claim to exclusive possession of the truth.

Christians understood that they were spreading the uniquely life-giving truth but also that this truth is present in the living Christ, not in any particular concept. That is why the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel can say, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6a). And the Gospel of Mark shows us how reluctant Jesus was to accept hasty professions about him (Mark 3:11; 8:29). Simply defining Jesus as the Son of God or the Messiah is not enough. Rather, one must be prepared to allow history to reveal the true meaning of such professions. The truth about Jesus can be expressed in words, but in order to present the living Christ, static conceptualizations are insufficient. Verbal expression of Christ requires formulae that are open to new discoveries throughout history. Simply saying that Jesus is the Messiah may say he is God's anointed king who will transform the world through power and victory; however, Jesus' approach to kingship is "Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:19–22): governing through the power of weakness.

But does the New Testament not say that it is Christ, "in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"? No, what the text says is that in him "are hidden" all these treasures (Col 2:3). How might Christians explain this? While all puzzles and tensions will find their fulfilment in the ultimate healing of all things through Christ, much of this still-to-be-realized reconciliation of all things is still "hidden." For now, we speak of this in hope, joyfully anticipating that end. However, we are neither able to predict all the details of what is to come nor to convince everyone of the truth of this vision of history.

If we understand this, we can also see why the Church holds that Christ is the fullness of God (Col 1:19), and that encountering others enriches Christians. We do not possess the truth in the sense that we know everything; rather we see that Christ's Passover renders accessible both the fulfilment of all longing and the meaning of all failure.

3.2. Christian Mission Does Not Claim That It Is up to the Missionary to "Convert" Non-Christians to Christianity; It Is Rather the Spirit of God Who Brings About Conversions: Missionaries Are Merely Witnesses, and They Themselves Also Need to Be Converted to a Life Ever More in Tune with Christ

The claim that "we should convert others" could be called a "transitive" understanding of mission. Theologically, transitive missionary activity is based on a misunderstanding. In Christian thought, the agent of a religious conversion is always the Holy Spirit moving human hearts. But does not even St. Paul use "transitive" conversion language in 1 Corinthians when he says that it is he himself who 'wins over/gains,' or 'rescues/saves' people (1 Cor 9:22)? He says this to underline how much he sacrificed for his mission, not to reflect on who is the agent at work in conversions. When thinking about how conversions

come about, St. Paul is unambiguous: it is no human activity but God's (see, 1 Cor 3:5–7). Along these lines, St. Augustine will later see that while you can be manipulated into some exterior religious practice, you can only believe if you yourself really want to (Augustine, *In Ev. Io.* 26.2).[7] He was not claiming that faith is an arbitrary choice. Rather, he was describing what happens when a person arrives at a conviction. While one may be forced by external pressures to perform physical acts, interior assent requires insight. This can only be achieved by an act of understanding. The only power involved here is the gentle force of truth,[8] not violence (Second Vatican Council 1965b, #1).

Nevertheless, human beings play a role in helping others to discover Christ, accepting the gospel, and coming to the Church. But they should not be called 'converters.' They are, rather, witnesses. They offer a truth that is beyond their control: they are "depositing" testimony. Those who listen are, in turn, unconstrained when accepting it. The same holds true of the Church as a whole. Its life should attract others, said Pope Francis quoting Benedict XVI (Francis 2013, #14). And our communities should palpably welcome newcomers. However, discretion is necessary: even the slightest (e.g., psychological) pressure to join would be abusive. And believers will not usually describe their faith as their own achievement either. Conversion is not achieved by the missionary, or by the church, or by the new believer, but by the Holy Spirit.[9]

A second aspect of the transitive misunderstanding of mission is the following. It is not only others that are in need of conversion. Missionaries, too, need conversion: they need to embrace an ever more honest life, more consistently in tune with the gospel. That is why spiritual masters such as Ignatius of Loyola encourage people to pray for deeper knowledge, fuller love and a more genuine devotion to Christ (Ignacio de Loyola 2010, #104). The Latin word for this prayed-for increase is *magis*. An interfaith encounter can become an honest search for more truth and can therefore also be a *magis* moment. Non-Christian questions and answers, non-Christian dedication and humility will then surely have an effect also on the Christian witness. Christians often say that through interfaith encounters they came to understand Christ better, and the 'other believer' helped them to become better Christians.

3.3. Christian Missions Should Not Promote an "Isolating" Faith but Rather Serve the Healing of Personal Relationships, Cultural Developments, and Societies

People who suffer from loneliness can feel rejected by their surroundings. A new community may be a solution. This need is sometimes used by missionary movements within both Islam and Christianity. On top, they may be shaped by a dualist worldview with a markedly negative view of other religious traditions. In the conversion process they may encourage people to despise their former belief and community. The real issue may be a personal problem such as loneliness, but the missionary effect may be breaking up relations of origin. Easily, this leads to mental and material dependence on the new faith community: it replaces the original relationships rather than reconciling them.

What might be a more positive process of conversion, one that involves a transformative increase in faith in God? While it is hardly possible to be reconciled with everyone, a well-discerned conversion should have reconciling effects on people's relationships. A sign of real growth in faith may be that the convert is able to handle family tensions and other relational challenges in a calm and constructive way without being overly judgmental or perfectionist.

What may be observed in personal relationships may also hold true of cultures. A religious tradition such as Islam or Christianity should not be identified with a single culture. When people join the Church, for example, they do not need to be inducted into 'Western' civilisation at the same time. For too long, Christian missions have collaborated with colonialism, with many regrettable consequences. Now we see that all elements of people's traditional cultures that are not contrary to the gospel should be protected. In light

of the gospel, cultural heritage, traditions and even myths need not come to an end but rather to their fulfilment. The gospel is intended to inspire cultures and transform them (Paul VI 1975, #20) but it is not meant to create one uniform civilization. Where the Church has recognized the value of cultural variety, it has been enriched rather than weakened.

The problem of "isolating faith" is not only an issue when a religious conversion separates a lonely person even more from their family. "Isolating faith" can also be the reduction of a religious tradition to the interior aspects of life. That would be a distortion of the full intention of religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Their testimony wants to inspire and improve the economy, politics and societies (Second Vatican Council 1965a, #2). In Roman Catholic terminology, it is precisely this integral (non-isolating) mission which is referred to as 'evangelization': "To evangelize is to make the kingdom of God present in our world" (Francis 2013, #176). This leads us to our next topic.

We have tried to identify and clarify what may be the most significant misunderstandings surrounding "dialogue" and "mission." Our next question is now: What is the relation between mission, dialogue, proclamation, and testimony in Christian theology?

4. Evangelization: Four Dynamics

One might want to split up the working time of the Church into two activities: sometimes one should listen to others, sometimes one should preach the gospel. Is that the idea behind Church wording when it calls for "dialogue and mission"? No. Theologically speaking, there is precisely one Church task. The Church "evangelizes" always and in all it does and is. But in which sense? Of course not in the sense of manipulating people to become Christians (above, Section 3.2). Evangelization is, rather, making the Kingdom of God present in our world, in the hearts of Christians and non-Christians, striving for the values of God's Kingdom to be ever more realized even in the social, political, and economic order. But what about mission, then?

There are four dynamics that can be specified as shaping evangelization. Firstly, there is "mission." It is not a separate activity. Rather, mission is the *reason* why the Church evangelizes: because it was commissioned, equipped with authority and sent ("missioned") by Christ to be this very leaven of evangelization.

A second formative dynamic of evangelization is "dialogue." Again, it is not a separate activity. Rather, it is the *style* in which all evangelization should be carried out. Namely, Christianity must always remain open to learning from others and to making new discoveries through humble communication.

The third dynamic is "proclamation." Its theological foundation lies in the insight that one cannot discover Christianity by only thinking deeply about life or carefully observing the order of nature.[10] One needs to be told about it. The Church is commissioned to communicate that, communicate it also in words. That is why evangelization also needs its articulation, its *narrative*. And what are the contents of this proclamation? The Church must communicate the paschal joy of God's Kingdom accessible through the risen Christ. This joy liberates people to love in new ways, enabling them to live in dignity and in commitment to others. In order to be transformed by the paschal joy, people need to know about it; and in order to know about it, they need to be told.

The fourth and final dynamic of evangelization is "testimony." Since witnessing is both a matter of speaking clearly and of living convincingly, since it implies the articulation of a particular reality and the humility which does not manipulate listeners, but also the courageous and risky life of the witness (*martys*, in Greek), and since, finally, witnessing is what Christ's disciples are sent explicitly to do (Matt 10:16–18), the dynamic of testimony integrates all other evangelising dynamics, namely, mission, dialogue, and proclamation. Testimony is, then, the *embodiment* of evangelization.

Now we can see more concretely how the propagation of the Christian faith gets its normative shape through its four key terms, namely, from a 20th century concept and from New Testament vocabulary. So, this terminological section may be epitomized in the following formula: evangelization has its specific style (dialogue), its reason (mission), its narrative (proclamation), and its embodiment (testimony).

5. A Methodology of Christian–Muslim Dialogue

We have already gained a first understanding of how theological concepts can fashion interreligious encounters. So, we might be ready to venture a comprehensive study on the interrelations between interfaith dialogue and theology. How do they inform each other? We are focussing on dialogues among Muslims and Christians here. But our vocabulary is strongly shaped by one side, the Christian perspective. Consequently, great care is called for when we use loaded terms. Let us therefore also dare to ask truly fundamental questions. We might start here by asking: what is theology, in the first place?

5.1. Theology: A Religion's Discourse

A working definition would be this: *theology is a religion's rational discourse*. The individual components of the definition need further explanation, of course. To avoid an endless chain when trying to clarify the clarifications, the following may suffice: "rational" is *what also the unconvinced can comprehend as consistent*, and "discourse" may stand for the *various linguistic forms of achieving and articulating knowledge*.

5.1.1. Intentions: Apologetic, Hermeneutic, and Talmudic

In order to understand more clearly what might be meant by theology, one should look at its agenda. Arguably, theology must have at least one of these three basic intentions: it is either "apologetic" or "hermeneutic" or "talmudic." All three designations are used here almost as *names*. That is to say, they are used here as short denominators of particular agendas; and all three are used favourably for the present purpose. "Apologetic" refers here to a theology which aims to demonstrate the *truth* of a religion. "Hermeneutic" designates a theology that shows the *meaning* of religious doctrines and practices. Apologetic and hermeneutic intentions are often intertwined. "Talmudic," however, is used here to characterize theologians who study their religion's sacred material with the main intent of remaining part of that tradition. One might argue that discourses on religion that do not address one of these three concerns are simply not theological.

5.1.2. Conceptual Confusion: "Religion"

Theologians belong to the religion they study. In this, however, the question of what religion actually is remains unanswered. Almost a hundred years ago, the Lutheran political scholar Eric Voegelin provided a telling answer to this question, probably deliberately simplifying things: "By *religion* one understands such phenomena as Christianity and the other great redemptive religions" (Voegelin 2000, p. 27). Voegelin might be admitting here that those who use the concept of religion easily project their own patterns of understanding onto others. We should keep that in mind.

5.2. Methodology: Parameters of Dialogue

We are wondering here how interfaith dialogues might gain theological relevance. Can specific procedures be developed for this? An appropriate "theology" will be proposed below. First, however, we must take a closer look at the various parameters by which constructive interreligious encounters can be measured. There are seven such parame-

ters, viz., climate, aims, positions, conditions, forms, correlations, guidelines and then, as promised, procedures.

5.2.1. Climate: Diplomatic or Theological

As we have seen above (Section 1), Paul VI introduced the word "dialogue" into Catholic theological reflection on interreligious encounters. This term consciously ties in with *philosophical* considerations from Europe's interwar and post-1945 periods (Körner 2025, p. 548). "Dialogue" was purposefully chosen, in order to signify more than just "encounter." Dialogue is a patiently continued process, involving ups and downs, with times of processing, forgiving and learning. Let us recall what we said above: Paul VI speaks of the "climate" of dialogue, indeed of dialogue as a particular climate: "*Il clima del dialogo è l'amicizia. Anzi il servizio*—the climate of dialogue is friendship, even service."[11] Is this not naïve? May there not be, often, atmospheric conditions that make "friendship" impossible? After all, the religious others one encounters may have evil intentions. Should one even then start a theological dialogue, humbly ready for any "service"? No. Theological dialogue may be prevented by particular situations, such as blatant dishonesty or violence. In such circumstances, *theological* dialogue is neither meaningful nor really possible. However, this does not mean that then *any* dialogue is impossible. One should see another dialogical "climate", beyond theological dialogue. There is "diplomatic" dialogue. Possibly, a wide range of issues cannot be discussed, let alone resolved, at present. In this case, all those issues can be put "on the shelf," and talks can still be held, namely, on those limited matters where progress seems possible. Conversely, this means that a dialogue in a climate of trust not only allows for profound theological discussion but can also address any meaningful topic, even potentially painful issues.[12]

5.2.2. Aims: Ecumenical, or Interreligious

We have already seen that Christian–Muslim dialogue is sometimes rejected from the outset or leads to disappointment because it is confused with ecumenism (above, Section 2.1). In Muslim–Christian dialogue, our aim is not unification, because the Christian and the Islamic defining testimonies are not identical. The aim of interfaith dialogue is, rather, to achieve "understanding" on five levels. A first and very basic level is reached when a certain faith community comes up with a practical issue; now, "understanding" means to find a good solution for a practical issue. The second level aims at seeing better why the others believe and live differently. A third aim is to understand more clearly what one's own belief actually means. A level also worth mentioning is the fourth aim that believers in dialogue want to give witness to their own faith and explain it. The fifth aim is finding out how we can shape the world together.

5.2.3. Positions: Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism

What are the salvific prospects (such as paradise) for people who have not adopted "our" faith? This question can be used to classify various "theologies of religions." Another such question would be whether other religions proclaim the truth. Answers to these questions can be grouped under three positions.[13] Those who believe that others cannot be saved—or that their religion does not proclaim truth—represent, in theology of religions, "exclusivism." "Inclusivism," on the other hand, believes that people who do not belong to one's own religion can also share in the salvation it offers—or in the truth it proclaims (Second Vatican Council 1965c, #22). Finally, a "pluralism" in theology of religions holds that several or all religions are paths to salvation—or sources of truth—in their own right.

5.2.4. Conditions: Duty of Identity, Courage of Alterity, Sense of Disparity, Right to Diversity

In 2017, Pope Francis described the attitude that one should adopt for interreligious dialogue in an interesting manner (Francis 2017). He reminded believers of their "duty of identity" and appealed (as we have seen above, Section 2.3) to their "courage of alterity." What was he pointing at? Interreligious dialogue needs interlocutors who keep studying their own tradition. This is also because very often, interlocutors in interreligious dialogue are perceived as representatives of their own faith community, if they want it or not. Pope Francis thus underlined the importance of knowing ever better one's own religion, and standing by it. However, he did not stop there. His second proposal, the "courage of otherness," is not simply repeating the same with different words: boldly daring to be seen as the religious other. Rather, the courage of "alterity," of otherness, also involves the willingness to start walking together with others. As we have seen, for Francis, the goal of this shared path is "the city of humankind," i.e., a humane civilization.

The two conditions mentioned by Francis are helpful invitations, but they appeal first and foremost to personal virtues. The socio-political context of all interfaith dialogues remained unmentioned. When considering "conditions" one should also take into account communities, cultures and other critical factors, and one should work to improve them where necessary and as far as possible. Along these lines, two more conditions should be mentioned. Firstly, interreligious dialogue requires a "sense of disparity." Often, the encounter is marked by imbalance between the two parties involved. One side may depend on the other, there may be a difference in linguistic and rhetorical competence, or, in the language used for the dialogue, one religion may have an established terminology, which the other one lacks in the language used. Such discrepancies need not impede, let alone prevent, dialogue, but they must be recognized.

The final condition to be mentioned concerns the legal situation in which the encounters take place. Here is a touchstone question: Is there a "right to diversity"? In the context where the dialogue takes place, are all decisions (as long as they do not harm others) allowed for individuals and communities on an equal footing, even if they may be perceived by some as a cultural imposition or a societal challenge? This right includes the possibility of leaving a religious community, of practicing a religion in public, and of publicly living as a non-believer.

5.2.5. Types: Life and Action, Spirituality and Theology, Debate and Representation

Post-conciliar Vatican interfaith documents distinguish between different "forms" of dialogue (Secretariat for Non-Christians 1984, #28; Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1991, #42), but, wisely, they are not sharply separating them from each other. Four such forms are regularly mentioned. "Dialogue of life": people of different faiths share their everyday context quite naturally. "Dialogue of action": people of different faiths work together for a better world. "Dialogue of religious experience": people of different faiths exchange spiritual insights. "Dialogue of experts": religious scholars of different faiths meet for theological discussion. As this list of four is often presented as complete, two other forms should be mentioned that actually require their own skills and should therefore also be considered in the curricula of educational programmes within religious communities. "Dialogue of lay debate": people without theological expertise argue, often massively, for their own belief. Finally, "dialogue of official representation": recognized representatives of different communities meet, not so much for theological debate, but in the awareness that their meeting has a symbolic character for society, politics or religious communities.

5.2.6. Correlations: Face-to-Face, Side-by-Side, Back-to-Back

In addition to the aforementioned parameters, in 2010, Pope Benedict XVI introduced an important aspect to enable a more precise differentiation between various dialogical situations. He distinguished two "dimensions" (Benedict XVI 2010), and a third can be organically added to these. Benedict expressed his distinction graphically by paying attention to where people's gaze is directed during dialogue. In this sense his distinction designates two different types of "correlations." Benedict distinguished between "face-to-face" and "side-by-side" correlations. The "face-to-face" correlation can naturally be understood as describing a dialogue in which each interlocutor bears witness to the beauty of one's own religion and listens to the other: it is especially here that the aforementioned "purification and enrichment" (Benedict XVI 2012a)[14] can happen for both parties. A "side-by-side" dialogue, on the other hand, is one in which both bear witness to God together within a society—and work together. As indicated above, a third dimension should be added, certainly in the spirit of Pope Benedict. Interreligious dialogue also implies the trust which allows the interlocutors to spend time apart: sometimes, one must stay with members of one's own community, focusing on one's own tradition. There, all the questions and discoveries from interreligious encounters will be present, and new encounters can be prepared. This third type of relationship in interreligious dialogue should be called the "back-to-back" constellation. It comes into play, for example, in confessional theology or religious education in denominational difference. As much as the face-to-face and side-by-side constellations need moments of back-to-back, so should the back-to-back constellations be a preparation for further interfaith encounters and collaborations.

5.2.7. Guidelines: Brotherhood and Pain

During his visit to Jerusalem, Pope Francis provided a basic fourfold orientation for interreligious dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. His "Jerusalem call" can serve as a guideline for an examen of conscience in interfaith encounters. "Let us respect and love one another as brothers and sisters! Let us learn to understand the suffering of others! Let no one use the name of God to justify violence! Let us work together for justice and peace!" (Francis 2014).

5.3. Procedures: On the Way to Interaction

Having prepared ourselves in this way, we can now try to describe different theological patterns that emerge in interfaith encounters. (See Appendix A) When faced with another religion, eight different types of theology can come into play. All these types can probably be found already when Christian–Muslim theological controversies began. However, except for the penultimate one, the following designations are my own terminological proposals.

5.3.1. "Flagellative" Theology

Members of religious traditions may perceive the emergence, or growing proximity, of another faith group as a powerful threat. They may try to make sense of this in terms of a "theology of history," that is, by asking how God is active in this development. In Christian thought we can observe how a biblical motif is being used in order to answer this question. The interpretation is that what is happening is the result of our sins, of our own unfaithfulness to God. One tends to identify the divine "scourge" in this, *flagellum* in Latin: God's "cudgel, rod of discipline, whip."[15] Such patterns in theology of history may work in two directions. They can be a means of scourging one's own brothers and sisters in faith, but they are often also used to dehumanise religious others as mere instruments of divine punishment. Along these lines, Muslims are turned into "God's rod and the devil's servant, there is no doubt about that."[16] Such an interpretation of history answers the question of

how God could allow others to have the upper hand when "we" are actually God's own people. In this sense, the "flagellative" approach is in fact a kind of theology. However, it avoids a substantive examination of the alternative faith. The others are, here, nothing but horrifying enemies.

5.3.2. "Refutative" Theology

Theologians often attempt to prove others to be wrong. The technical term for such argumentative undermining is *elenchos* in Greek; the Arabic for this is *radd* (pl. *rudūd*) and in Latin it is *confutatio* or *refutatio*. This is why I propose "refutative" theology here. The first centuries of Christian and Islamic thinkers' interaction produced many such works. However, many "refutative" writings found their knowledge of the other's convictions only in hearsay or isolated quotes from their scripture. Some interlocutors still work on that basis. They overlook the others' contexts and methods of understanding. Isolated or indeed misquoted scriptural passages and fragments of tradition make others look ridiculous. What is truly ridiculous in this, however, is often the attempted refutation itself. It does not proceed from an attempt at understanding the other. Two examples: sharia does not mean cutting off hands; and for Jesus to be Son of God, no divine reproductive biology is needed.

5.3.3. "Conversive" Theology

Theology practised with others in mind need not be so polemical. It may go beyond proving one's interlocutors wrong. The next step would be the attempt to convince them of the exclusive truth of one's own faith and encourage them to change religion. Everyone should have every right to present arguments in order to convince others. After all, arguments are meant to convince. However, where non-argumentative pressure is exerted, for instance through fear or persuasion, its consequences are no longer left to the gentle power of reasoning. The attempt to persuade has then become a breach of boundaries. Such encroaching efforts at control could be called "conversive." Genuine conversions happen in the freedom of the Holy Spirit (above, Section 3.2). It is in that freedom that people can find truth and faith, can find God. This is why already Vatican II stated: "It is one of the major tenets of Catholic doctrine that man's response to God in faith must be free: no one, therefore, is to be forced to embrace the Christian faith against his own will."[17]

5.3.4. "Defensive" Theology

If theology limits itself to apologetics it becomes impoverished. This assertion may come as a surprise. Didn't we say above (Section 5.1.1) that theology may be "apologetic," indeed, and that it is one of the three legitimate theological approaches, alongside the "hermeneutic" and "talmudic" intentions? And doesn't the New Testament actually portray apologetics as a truly Christian concern?

> *1 Peter 3:15* In your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence [*apologia*, in Greek] to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you [...].

Apologia means here to "explain" believers' hope. That implies that others perceive a surprising joy in Christians and wonder why they live like that. A response to this will probably not be a philosophical proof of the Christian doctrinal system. It seems, rather, that Christians are called here to tell the story of Christ and testify to the Easter experience. This account (*apologia*) is a meaningful response to a good question. So, what is the problem with "apologetics" (McCallum 2024)? It presents one's own faith in light of objections. This easily leads to verbal battles and rarely reaches the core of the faith. Both sides feel attacked and think they have to "defend" themselves and their convictions. The beauty of tradition and testimony falls victim to perceived aggression. Would it not be more constructive to

present one's own linguistic and non-linguistic forms of faith expression in their own shape and depth, and thus as relatable?

5.3.5. "Equative" Theology

Another theology of interfaith relations is based on the conviction that there is no fundamental disagreement because the other religion means in fact the same as one's own. For example, when dealing with the Qur'an and what we call Islam today, Nicholas of Cusa († 1464) tries to collect what is, so to speak, "Christian" in it. In that, he tries to equate Christianity and Islam. This may be an act of self-assurance or a pedagogical explanation, but Nicholas's ultimate goal is to convert others. His "equative" method is meant to lead Muslims to Christianity.[18] Conversely, many Muslims, indeed, many suras,[19] understand Jesus' message as basically identical with Qur'anic convictions. Let the intention be "conversive" or otherwise: what we see here is equative theology. Nicholas of Cusa believes that there is one faith that appears in various forms, and one *religio* that has many rites: "All bright people see that there is only one worship of God and religion beyond all differences in practice."[20] Similarly, "interioristic" (Knauer 2011) theologies are equative in that they want to demonstrate that the Qur'an and Islam contain the fundamental tenets of Christianity, albeit expressed in a manner that remains largely unknown to Muslims.

5.3.6. "Transpositive" Theology

A similar move is made if one sets aside what is controversial and shifts the attention to a preliminary issue (transposing it, so to speak) in the hope of finding agreement at a higher (or more fundamental) level. Sometimes such an attempt is motivated by the concern that differences in conviction will lead to political tensions. A remedy is provided by defining common values, by creating a project of global ethics (Küng 1998; Körner 2010), or by identifying what is fundamentally humane. For example, rather than debating the divine Sonship of Jesus, we could agree on the Golden Rule.[21] Some critical questions may be in place here. Does controversy really divide societies? Is it not rather the avoidance of controversy that leads to resentment? And how solid is a common ground which consists in the verbalisation of what is "universally human" or "our value consensus"? Are not precisely the controversial traditions the resource which helps many people to understand and implement great orienting concepts, such as peace? And who should be the arbiter to decide what is really controversial or when consensus has actually been reached? Furthermore: are people who are firmly convinced of their belief obliged to leave their controversial tenets out of the social discourse? Can and should everything traditional be translated into rational commonplaces? Is this possible, or even desirable? Couldn't the process of constant disagreement be productive? Do neighbours first have to agree on "values"? Isn't a lived (rather than formulated) style of coexistence (and, in the event of conflict, case settlement) normally sufficient? Furthermore, isn't a majority vote enough for the passing of laws in a democracy? Isn't an explicit "basic law" the exception that can and must only be agreed upon at a historical turning point? And isn't the urge that all citizens must jointly name what is truly human or even pledge allegiance an implicit marginalisation of some?

5.3.7. Comparative Theology

One might try to compare elements of one's own faith with those of another religion in order to recognize similarities and differences. That is what comparisons do. However, the procedures of "Comparative Theology" seem to contain a number of difficulties. Understanding faith is something dynamic; the procedure of classical Comparative Theology, on the other hand, is "positional": one first states where one "stands" due to one's own

faith, then isolates a certain question out of one's own and some other tradition and holds these two isolated elements next to each other in order to see what is similar and what is different. The static nature of this procedure has even been identified and criticised by some proponents of Comparative Theology.[22] Things become quite different if one changes the setting. If a theologian gets up from their private desk and stops only proceeding from given texts, they might collaborate theologically with living colleagues of different religions. A desirable setting would now be that all participants share a similar concept of rationality and a certain proximity to their own faith traditions and communities. In such a setting, one will immediately go beyond comparing existing positions. One might already have started, thus, a dialogue that has a transformative effect on people and traditions. For one, the history of Islamic–Christian interaction is beginning anew today under different auspices.

5.3.8. "Interactive" Theology

The doctrine of one's own religion develops through truly interactive (von Stosch 2019, col. 360) dialogue with people whom one respects as truly different: acknowledging their otherness without othering them. This interactive dialogue enables new, decisive and lasting discoveries to be made on both sides. But how can we know that a given theological encounter is truly dialogical, is "interactive theology"? This can be assessed in light of these three questions:

- Have the interlocutors the opportunity to present their own beliefs convincingly? Such a presentation will usually be argumentative but may also contain elements of testimony or condensed formulas. The presenter should mark them as such and be ready to develop them in the course of the interaction.
- Can controversial questions be asked, even unpleasant and exaggerating ones, e.g., in light of contrasting profiles? Such questions must leave time and space for detailed responses, which may require new research and reflection, extensive contextualisations and the exposure of misrepresentations.
- Can something truly new happen for either side, such as "purification and enrichment," both in one's own faith community and its teaching, or in one's personal faith journey? Incidentally, this readiness to learn interactively also includes the possibility of changing religion out of newly gained conviction.

5.4. Theology of Religion as Theology of History

The theological encounter of religions—especially of Jews, Christians, and Muslims—is nothing less than an ongoing entanglement (Heyden and Nirenberg 2026, p. 6). These lines have been written from a Roman Catholic perspective; and from the Christian point of view, one can say this: The history of the understanding of our faith is *not concluded*. God reveals his reality and truth through history. In the resurrection of Christ the fulfilment of all history has become manifest and accessible. In this light, we can see that the events which tell us something about God did not cease when the Apostles died. New and theologically significant things are happening all the time. These include cultural achievements and civilisational ruptures, philosophical insights and the words of poets, but also the emergence and developments of other religions. We can therefore not limit the sources of theological understanding to the canonical texts. If that is true, the dichotomy between "God-given revelation" and "theologically neglectable human efforts" is false. Instead, the theology of religions should be practiced as part of theology of history: out of the conviction that God is, in every generation, communicating Himself and is calling humanity to collaborate in His project. That does not imply that every event is good or that every religious claim is automatically true, but rather that in everything, there is an opportunity to deepen our understanding of God and our communion with Him.

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Notes

[1] Select NT examples for the verbs and their semantic fields are, for *apostellein*: Rom 12:15 and Acts 26:17, for *kēryssein*: 1 Cor 1:23 and Matt 24:14, for *euangelizesthai*: Rom 1:15 and Acts 11:20, for *martyrein* etc.: 1 Thess 4:6 and Acts 20:21.

[2] NB: The earliest Church documents to speak of dialogue, viz., *Ecclesiam suam* and *Nostra aetate*, use *colloquium* in their Latin versions. Why not *dialogus*? *Dialogus* was at the time understood to be only a literary genre, as for example in Justin Martyr's *Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo*. That was of course not what the pope had in mind when speaking of "dialogue." So, the Latinists thought *colloquium* would do it, a word which means "conversation, discussion." However, that was not what Paul VI had in mind either. He was not simply speaking of people talking. He meant the attitude, atmosphere and activity of living encounter. (See above, in the main text of the article.) In fact, he expressly said that he was taking up a particular term, a recently developed concept: "*A propos de cette impulsion intérieure de charité qui tend à se traduire en un don extérieur, Nous emploierons le nom, devenu aujourd'hui usuel, de dialogue*." ("When referring to that interior impulse of charity which tends to find expression in outward giving, we will be using a name which has become quite common today, and that is 'dialogue.'" #64). The Vatican experts still rendered that by "*colloquium*," which made the artificiality of that Latin translation obvious. Consequently, after *Ecclesiam*

suam (28 August 1964), we find *dialogus* used quite naturally in the Latin versions of the conciliar texts, the first being *Unitatis redintegratio* of 21 November 1964.

[3] "*[L]e rapport de l'Eglise avec le monde [...] peut mieux s'exprimer sous la forme d'un dialogue*", which could be rendered as "the form, in which the Church's relationship with the world [...] might be better expressed is dialogue." Compare also the official English version, which in this case is quite appropriate: "the sort of relationship for the Church to establish with the world should be more in the nature of a dialogue". Two technical remarks are due here. (i) In the main text, I am neither following the wording of the Encyclical's official English translation, nor am I translating from its Latin version. Neither of the two can count as a faithful representation of the Encyclical's message. Both are renderings of the French archetype, and sometimes they actually distort the text's original intention. Particularly striking is the English 'translation' of the key affirmation: "*L'Eglise doit entrer en dialogue avec le monde dans lequel elle vit. L'Eglise se fait parole; l'Eglise se fait message; l'Eglise se fait conversation*", which originally meant something like this: the Church is now rediscovered as being God's mystery alive and therefore as dynamic, interactive, dialogical; but the official English version only has: "The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make." (#67[65]) (ii) Though not copying the English version from the Vatican's official website in the main text above, I use its paragraph numbering, which differs slightly from the section counting in the other languages.

[4] See Matt 28:19a "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." It may be noted that, unlike *apostellein*, *kēryssein*, *euangelizesthai*, and *martyrein* (the words discussed above), the verb used here, *mathēteuein*, had no great career in the Church's 'missionary' vocabulary. Why not? Perhaps its more specific meaning "to make Y a disciple of X" seems to have come out of sight due to its more general meaning "to teach." Therefore already the Vulgate renders both *mathēteuein* (Matt 28:19) and *didaskein* (Matt 28:20) by the same Latin verb *docere* ("to teach").

[5] The present author has published several previous reflections on similar themes. See (Körner 2008a, 2008b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2020).

[6] Not by chance, this is the first theme discussed in Troll, Muslims Ask, Christians Answer.

[7] "*Intrare quisquam ecclesiam potest nolens, accedere ad altare potest nolens, accipere Sacramentum potest nolens: credere non potest nisi volens*."

[8] "*[S]uaviter simul ac fortiter*—at once quietly and powerfully."

[9] Paul says already in his earliest letter that he has to "preach God's gospel" (1 Thess 2:9), and to "exhort and encourage" the believers, but that the one who invites ("calls") new members is God: "we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (2:12).

[10] Muslims, by contrast, might say that a person can discover their belief without anybody's help. That is at least the point of Muḥammad ibn Tufayl's (d. 1185) story of the fictitious figure Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓan (Ibn Tufayl 1929).

[11] Ecclesiam suam (#90): the official English translation does not seem to render this fully: "Dialogue thrives on friendship, and most especially on service" (#87).

[12] For example, in Evangelii gaudium, Pope Francis did so "humbly" (#253) but in apostolic boldness (*parrhēsia*, #259).

[13] Literally, the three models seem to turn up for the first time in the chapter titles of Alan Race's Christians and Religious Pluralism, following Wilfred Cantwell Smith's The Meaning and End of Religion.

[14] The formula appears for the first time in Dialogue and Mission (1984), #21; Pope Francis uses it in Evangelii gaudium #250 by quoting Pope Benedict XVI's Christmas address of 2010.

[15] Martin Luther, Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute (1518, explanations of his 95 theses), Weimar Edition (= WA), vol. 1, p. 535, line 33. Sourge is, in Hebrew, *šôṭ*, Isaiah 10:26 etc.

[16] Martin Luther, Vom kriege widder die Türcken (1528), WA, vol. 30 II, p. 116, lines 16f.

[17] Dignitatis humanae, #10, with a series of references to the Fathers of the Church in the Declaration's footnote #8.

[18] Nicolai de Cusa, Cribratio Alkorani, 81: book I, section XX (Opera Omnia, vol. 8, p. 68): *manuductio, i.e., "pedagogical* instruction."

[19] E.g., Qur'an 4:162; 5:46.

[20] "*Una est igitur religio et cultus omnium intellectu vigentium, quae in omni diversitate rituum praesupponitur*." Nicolai de Cusa, De pace fidei, #16, chapter VI (Opera Omnia, vol. 7, p. 15).

[21] The Common Word, with its change of perspective, is "transpositive," too: in the Islamic–Christian discussion, one could agree, the letter suggests, on the twofold commandment of love as a shared basis. However, that suggestion was not intended as a conclusive solution to the Islamic–Christian doctrinal debate; rather, the Muslim side responded to embarrassing Vatican months of non-dialogue and thus started a change of style that enabled further encounters.

[22] (von Stosch 2019, col. 360). There, von Stosch even mentions "interpersonal, interactive [!] and dialogical procedures.

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