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Effective Interreligious Dialogue

As the world is becoming more and more globally connected, it is becoming increasingly important for religious people to be able to dialogue effectively with the religious other. What is the most effective way to have interreligious dialogue? Should this dialogue focused on conversion of the religious other to a particular religious view or is dialogue focused on solely building relationships to mutual grow in their knowledge of the divine and its relationship to the world. This question of what is most effective is what will be addressed in this essay by analyzing how invitational rhetoric may be a good filter for how interfaith dialogue occurs. If dialogue between religions is done poorly or from an imperialistic understanding, religious fighting can ensue.

Literature Review

As a caveat, the research done on interreligious study for this essay comes from a Christian theological standpoint. In stating this, the principles laid out by the research is easily applicable to dialogue from any religious point of view. The reason being is that interfaith communication always involves the religious other, someone of differing religious beliefs than you; therefore, studying how to dialogue effectively with the religious other will be similar from any view point because there is always a religious other to dialogue with.

To begin interreligious dialogue, one has to recognize that the end goal determines how the communication will progress. The essays that will be addressed explain the ideology used to engage in interfaith dialogue. The reason for dialoging is crucial in having effective dialogue. Lastly, a person's theological understanding of the significance of other religions determines the quality of the dialogue as well as the soteriological epistemology of other religions one has. Essentially this means how one understands how salvation works in their religion and other religions.

To start, James Keaton and Charles Soukup, in *Dialogue and Religious Otherness: Toward a Model of Pluralistic Interfaith Dialogue*, explain what dialogue is as well as three ideologies that affect interfaith discourse. Keaton and Soukup start their article by explaining what dialogue is; this may seem unimportant, but without an understanding of what dialogue is, engaging in interreligious dialogue would be ineffective. What dialogue is, is captured in this definition, "dialogue is not merely "instrumental" or about meeting individual "goals" or attaining rewards, rather to engage in dialogue is "to acknowledge and respond to the address of the other in light of her own experienced truth." (Keaton, Soukup, 171) The meaning behind this,

in regards to interfaith dialogue, is that dialogue is not just passing along information or gaining knowledge of the religious other, it is about communicating with the religious other discussing the aspects of faith in light of their own context, not just for the sake of passing information but for the sake of building relationship. Dialogue is essential in building relational wholeness. It is struggling through the relationship between personal beliefs and acceptance of others beliefs. (Keaton, Soukup, 171) To struggle through differing religious beliefs, it is crucial to understand how a person's beliefs include, or not include, the religious other.

This is why Keaton and Soukup explain three views of how personal beliefs interact with the religious other. The three views being: Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism. All of these deal with the soteriology and how religions include other religions into a salvation plan. Exclusivism proclaims that each religion has a salvific path but only one path out of all the religions is salvific; Christians usually claim their own path to be The path, as in the one and only path. Inclusivism articulates that there is only one path to salvation but it assumes that many people are on that path. An easy comparison is: Jesus is the only way but one can be a Muslim and follow the way of Christ and have access to salvation, Christian salvation. Pluralism understands that each religions has their own salvation plan and each one is salvific for each group, Christ for Christians, Allah for Muslims, Enlightenment for Buddhist, etc. (Keaton, Soukup, 176-179) What Keaton and Soukup seem to be claiming in their article is that having a pluralistic view will created the most authentic dialogue because it does not require religions to

Roger Burggraeve, in *Dialogue as Transcendence: A Levinasian Perspective on the Anthropological-Ethical Conditions for Interreligious Dialogue*, articulates that interfaith dialogue starts with an understanding of self-identity to build dialogue. What needs to be understood is that self-identity can only be found through dialogue with the other because only through relationship with something that is autonomous to the self does one understand the self. (Burggraeve, 2-5) This idea, that to understand other is to understand self, is the whole point behind interreligious dialogue. Dialogue is necessary to learn about the religious other while providing edification for the self. Nowhere in this understanding of dialogue does it mention dialogue being assimilation into personal belief. In fact, if this notion is taken literally then if one is assimilated into the other's beliefs, dialogue has not commenced because there is no religious other. That is why Burggraeve articulates the significance of recognizing self and other as a tension of identification that only dialogue and relationship can resolve.

To finish, Gregory Baum expresses a catholic view of interreligious dialogue from a catholic understanding. This catholic view is strictly a post Vatican II view that was influenced by documents produced by Vatican II. Baum is trying to articulate the notion that all religions contain some truth from God. Through recognition of this previous statement, catholic theologians have accepted that God works in other religions and through an understanding of this dialogue can commence effectively because the church is trying to expose those truths. God's covenant has been expanded to religions outside of Judaism and because of this expansion; truths found in other religions can be concluded as part of God's truth. (Baum, 8) With this recognition,

dialogue becomes possible due to a lack of imperialistic conversation but instead mutual growth of understanding about the nature of the divine.

All of these articles point to an understanding that accepting other religions as is, not trying to convert others, is the best way to have interreligious dialogue. Truths are found in each religion and dialogue is a way to flesh out those truths and mutual learn from religions and grow closer to an understanding of the divine. By moving away from an exclusivist and inclusivist understanding and more towards an accepting, pluralistic understanding dialogue between religions will be more effective.

Communication theory

By analyzing invitational rhetoric as a credible way to engage in dialogue between religions, in light of the mutuality model, a model of dialogue that Paul Knitter articulates, is what this essay concludes to be the most effective way to participate in dialogue between religions.

Paul Knitter, a catholic theologian and professor at Union Theological Seminary, in his book, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, articulates four different models to how interreligious dialogue is executed. This essay will address just one of those models in particular. The “Mutuality Model,” as Knitter words it, is a model that directly uses an invitational rhetoric style of persuasion to engage in interfaith dialogue. Within dialogue, commonalities and particularities between religions must be addressed and how one frames the use of particularities and commonalities will affect the quality of dialogue. By placing an emphasis on commonalities and disregarding the particular truths that each religion holds to will create a different relationship than dialogue that places emphasis on the particularities of a religion without recognizing the commonalities. The Mutuality Model places an emphasis on the both commonalities and particularities

People who accept this model of interreligious dialogue are concerned with are authentic relationships with the religious other, not proselytizing. (Knitter, 109) Mutuality involves leveling the playing fields in interfaith dialogue as to not assume one religion is superior to another religion, in regards to salvation this model does not assume any one way is the only way because each religion has their own truths. This becomes problematic for many conservative evangelicals who solely believe that Jesus is the only one who can offer salvation, but again the main emphasis of this religion is to build relationship not produce converts. (Knitter, 109) Through three different “bridges,” as Knitter calls them, a historical-philosophical bridge, religious-mystical bridge, and ethical-practical bridge, dialogue can presumably be achieved.

The Philosophical-historical bridge recognizes and emphasizes that all religions have a limited understanding of a transcendent reality, for a Christian this would be God but because not all religions have a deity the term God or gods will not be used. Because no religion has a complete picture of the divine reality religions need to be in conversation with one another to

increase in their own knowledge of the divine reality. The Mystical-Religious bridge understands, “That the Divine is both more than anything experienced by any one religion and yet present in the mystical experiences of them all.” (Knitter, 112) Lastly, the Ethical-practical bridge emphasizes that all altruistic religions have a set of ethical standards that involve serving the humanity and facing the problems that afflict humanity.

By building relationship through dialogue based on these commonalities, an equal relationship is built between religions. Not only does the mutuality model emphasize these commonalities, it accepts that each religion has particularities and it stresses that dialogue must involve these particularities, not shy away from them, to build an authentic relationship with the religious other.

This model that Knitter lays out may seem very similar to Keaton and Soukup’s version of pluralism because it is. The difference is that pluralism does not suppose mutual growth through relationship; indeed pluralism could lead to this form of relationship, but for the mutuality model mutual growth through relationship and dialogue is crucial. Lastly, the difference between these two ideologies is that pluralism still forces religious ideas on others imperialistically; therefore, pluralism accepts all religions as is but forces people to claim that each religion is equal. Not all people want to claim that religions are equal. Mutuality model does expect the equality of religions but to be involved in this ideology it is not a prerequisite to believe that.

How invitational rhetoric is involved in this ideology is its connection to the deep rooted dialogical understanding of this model: dialogue is to form relationship not persuade, dialogue is gaining understanding not force opinions. Mutuality model accentuates this thought by encouraging interreligious dialogue to gain understanding, not to make converts. Foss and Griffin claim that Rhetoric is “a communication exchange in which participants create an environment where growth and change can occur but where changing others is neither the ultimate goal nor the criterion for success in the interaction.” (Bone, Griffin, Sholz, 436) Through this definition of invitational rhetoric it is easy to see the connections between Knitters mutuality model for dialogue and Foss and Griffins articulation of invitational rhetoric, that communication is where ideas are shared not forced, people grow in relationship and mutually learn from one another.

Thinking of rhetoric in this manner is drastically different from the traditional way of thinking going all the way back to Aristotle. According to Aristotle, rhetoric is the tool used to understand and recognize persuasion. (Bone, Griffin, Sholz, 434) Rhetoric by definition is the use of persuasion; this however does not work well for interreligious dialogue because forcing ideas on others is not well received by most people. Mutuality Model is trying to eradicate this style of thinking, which means it is going to take a new way of understanding rhetoric to have effective dialogue. Invitational Rhetoric is this new way. Invitational Rhetoric challenges the dominant Rhetoric definition that has been held from Aristotle until the 20th century when the

definition of it Rhetoric started to change. (Bone, Griffin, Sholz, 434-435) Since the change in definition, rhetoric has expanded and is not solely focused on persuasion but more broadly it is focused on sharing information.

According to Foss and Griffin, rhetoric takes on two forms the first being the offering perspective. This perspective reveals a deeply held understanding in Invitational Rhetoric that Rhetoric is laying out a perspective one has so that the audience, if they so choose, can accept that perspective or not; it is a simple relaying of information that is non-imperialistic or hostile. It does however require the rhetor to offer the perspective with passion as to fully express the meaning of the perspective. (Foss, Griffin, 7) The second aspect of Rhetoric is the external conditions. What makes Invitational Rhetoric different is the allowance of audience participation. The audience is directly involved in the transfer of information so that both the audience and rhetor can be informed. There are specific conditions that need to be met before an audience can do this. The first condition is that the audience needs to feel safe, there needs to be freedom for speaking ideas, and each person needs to feel valued including the rhetor. (Foss, Griffin, 7, 10) Only when these conditions are met does mutual growth occur.

The connection between this and interreligious dialogue are crucial. For interfaith communication to be effective both parties need to passionately express their position, without forcing, and create a safe environment for the relationship to foster. Unfortunately safe conditions are not always met and communication can become hostile. One communicator may try to gain a position of power, this trap of gaining power over another can be easy to fall into due to the fact that the traditional understanding of rhetoric is to gain power and dominate others through persuasion. (Foss, Griffin, 2-3) What should happen in this instance according to Foss and Griffin is re-sourcement. This concept is the reframing of the conversation, either changing the topic of dialogue or thinking about the topic in a way that takes away the possibility of power assertion. This is necessary when dialogue becomes hostile; when communication becomes strictly persuasion. (Foss, Griffin, 9) However, the ideal of invitational rhetoric and the mutuality model is that a safe environment where people are valued and feel free to share ideas will build a relationship and congruently provide a foundation for further interreligious dialogue. Mutual growth in divine epistemology, the goal of mutuality model, happens only through invitational rhetoric.

Conclusion

Interreligious dialogue is most effective if it is initiated by sharing in relationship not trying to persuade or convert. Invitational Rhetoric explains that communication does not have to solely be persuasion of another person but can be articulation of knowledge and belief for the sole purpose of building a genuine relationship with the other. The implications of invitational rhetoric if applied to dialogue between religious others, is dialogue that is uninhibited by a threat of conversion or persuasion and is discourse that is fuelled by growing in knowledge and relationship. Knitter, in his mutuality model, explains the necessity to engage in dialogue that

does not diminish your own religious particularities while also not putting down the particularities of others. This model appreciates the commonalities that connect religion but does not rely exclusively on them to initiate the communication. Dialogue is a combination of discussing particularities and commonalities without intent of persuading the religious other to your particularities. This is why invitational rhetoric is intimately involved in interreligious dialogue. The most effective way to dialogue is to relate not persuade. The stakes are high in this topic, dialogue if done incorrectly or ineffectively can be damaging and lead to further separation of religious others, but dialogue done effectively can create unity between religions and potentially promote peace. Because of the interconnectedness of the world, it is imperative to engage in healthy dialogue, not throwing away your own particularities but sharing them to help others grow in their own epistemology of the divine while congruently sharing with you.

The mutuality model understood in light of invitational rhetoric provides a solid ground for answering what is the most effective way to engage in interreligious dialogue. Through a mutual sharing of knowledge and a fostering of relationship, dialogue is feasible. A potential example of this method working could be found in the way that Christians and Muslims communicate with each other. There is much tension between these two religions, but if Christians and Muslims discussed their particularities they would realize that some of the particularities are shared like worshipping the same Abrahamic God. This could lead to a lessening of tension between the two religions. The communication would not be to convert but to simply share ideas and doctrine, to accept the other religion, and by doing so grow together in understanding. By applying both invitational rhetoric and the mutuality model many of the tensions between religions could be relieved. This is why effective dialogue between religions is essential.

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