Chapter 1

Foundations of Interreligious Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is less concerned with foundations as such than with the different kinds of dialogues undertaken at various levels between different religions as well as between religions and science and philosophy. The beliefs and dogmas at stake often dead-end these dialogues or lead to misunderstandings. “Spirituality” as a common trait of all religions supposedly uniting them in opposition to scientific materialism is a misleading concept. Religions deemed similar, such as monotheistic faiths, when analyzed in terms of their meanings and effects, are actually very different. However, different traditions, even when they diverge across space and time, can reveal interesting convergences in their philosophical teachings. The primeval infra-linguistic foundations of the sacred at the origins of humanity have been passed down through the millennia in different ways according to their different cultural histories. The ethical and legal issues arising from the role of science and technology today make it imperative to seize opportunities for dialogue. Faced with these new issues, religions and philosophies must collaborate in their attempts to address them. Consequently, their traditional role in the genealogy of ethics needs to be overhauled. This may be achieved through efforts to construct an empirically based universal ethics rather than a purely theoretical one that is limited to specific religious or philosophical doctrines. The success of these efforts is not guaranteed; however, they may be facilitated by the underdetermination of decisions by their motivations, an argument adapted from the concept of underdetermination of theory by facts.

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INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction, I feel compelled to state that I believe that beyond an attitude of goodwill and the rejection of violence, there is not really any such thing as a foundation for interreligious dialogue. Taking that as our premise, we can try to consider the available opportunities for engaging in such a dialogue, while minimizing potential pitfalls and misunderstandings. As a rule, interreligious and intercultural dialogues require a precise assessment of the most suitable communication strategies to apply in order to ensure the dialogue is productive, or in other words how best to ensure an enhanced understanding of the other. Dialogue can occur at several different levels. For example, we may focus on belief systems and representations of the world or on the specific behaviours and rituals different religious traditions resort to when approaching ethical, social and political issues.

When addressing beliefs, for example, the questions at issue may be articles of faith or dogmas or specific worldviews, such as Creation ex nihilo by an omnipotent creator, or the various guises and different conditions with regard to the transmigration and reincarnation of the soul, etc. Beliefs are often cited to explain seemingly strange behaviours. Beyond satisfying the curiosity of anthropologists or religious historians, however, I do not believe dialogue at this level to be very productive. The basic requirement for satisfying this curiosity—in addition to a willing attitude—is the typical open-mindedness ethnologists bring to bear when trying to make sense of a foreign culture. I do not mean to belittle this curiosity, as it can indeed represent an opportunity for a meaningful exchange of ideas. As a rule, however, the kinds of interreligious dialogues on a level of belief systems and general principles all too often fall on deaf ears. In spite of all sincere attempts to find common ground on matters of beliefs, these efforts more often than not derail into misunderstandings.

For example, it is often assumed that monotheistic religions can more readily see eye-to-eye because they have a single God in common. However, this is not the whole story. Not only does this summarily exclude members of humanity that are not Christian, Muslim or Jewish, but these religions also cannot be said to share the same God. Firstly, whereas His uniqueness is certainly asserted, He is also different in several ways, and it is these differences that have given rise to religious wars—a habit we still have not been able to put behind us. Moreover, if we look at the significance of what is called the Word of God, the various conceptions of God clearly differ and entail different implications. One may for example believe that the Word of God must be read and understood down to the letter as it is written in the Bible or in the Qur’an, or on the other hand, one may believe that the scriptures are open to interpretation, as is the case with such sacred texts as the Vedas or the Upanishads or the various founding myths in different cultures.

The different conceptions of God also enter into play depending on whether He is considered to be transcendent or immanent or both, or whether He is referred to as a person—a single one or one composed of three—or as an impersonal God that can be identified with nature, such as Spinoza’s God. And the concept of God is different yet again when He is conveyed by proselytizing religions claiming universality in their determination to convert as many humans as possible; or in the case of “tribal” religions acknowledging their circumscribed geographic, cultural and linguistic limitations and for whom universal-