

Why is there so much frustration about inter-religious dialogue?

In the context of this brief contribution, which is based solely on my experience of the Christian-Muslim dialogue in Egypt, I should like to clarify the different forms of inter-religious dialogue, arguing that confusing them by stressing *the* aspect of inter-religious dialogue is misleading. Indeed, the six forms of dialogue I am proposing here have different presuppositions, different aims, and different methods to achieve these goals. The point they have in common is that believers of different persuasions (or non-believers) talk about religion, but in my opinion, that does not constitute a unified discipline. When we talk about “inter-religious dialogue”, at best we only consider one of these six forms, and at worst, we confuse them. My contribution intends to show how this confusion (or simplification) is a source of frustration, both for the protagonists and the observers.

Six (provisional) forms of dialogue

1. The institutional dialogue

Its interlocutors are the representatives of the different religions (or of non-religious convictions), who speak on behalf of those who share their convictions. It is a political and diplomatic dialogue, in the noble sense of these terms, whose purpose is not to reach agreement, nor even to discuss the content of the beliefs, but to produce a symbolic effect, in and outside the communities represented.

When Pope Francis met Dr. Aḥmad al-Ṭayyeb, Grand Imam of the University of Al-Azhar, each had a symbolic message to convey. For example, during the meeting between the two leaders in Cairo, 28 April 1917, the Pope wanted to convey the message that Muslims and Christians are both facing barbarism, and that there is no war of religion between them. As for the Grand Imam, he wanted to assert his spiritual authority among Muslims around the world, in the role of the “pope of Islam”.

This institutional dialogue has no other content than its symbolic scope and gives rise to much frustration due to the fact that the ordinary observer expects “progress” to be made in doctrinal or ethical terms.

This is exactly the impression one has upon reading the recent Joint Declaration on “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together”, signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Dr Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, on 4 February 2019, in Abu Dhabi.

Symbolically, it is very important that the text exist: for the first time a document was signed jointly by the two religious authorities. But in terms of content, it is extremely frustrating, even outrageous: declaring that religions never incite to violence, is a declaration of principle that has been blatantly contradicted for centuries, for Islam and Christianity, as history shows. Likewise, to reduce religion to an appeal for human fraternity, neither to the Body of Christ nor to the *umma*, shows bewildering dogmatic poverty. The only thing worth remembering (or almost) about this text is that it exists, the extremely powerful and effective symbol that a word is possible, even if, in terms of content, it is rather hollow today.

You have probably experienced the same frustration at meetings at which an imam, a priest and a rabbi are invited and absolutely nothing happens. Nothing more is said than trying platitudes. What is asked of these meetings is what they cannot offer! If the guest speakers are present, it is not because they have something to say, but because they represent something. Symbolically, the speakers represent Muslims, Christians, Jews.... It is a strong image, but it is only an image.

2. The academic dialogue/”The dialogue of theological exchange”

The interlocutors are theologians, that is to say people who have a faithful and scientific approach to their faith, that they analyze with the tools of the human sciences: philosophy, hermeneutics, history, anthropology, sociology, psychology ... (Let us note in passing that it would be misleading to qualify the work of researchers in the religious sciences as inter-religious, when the researchers do not approach their subject of study as believers). The purpose of academic inter-religious dialogue is to clarify and discuss the faith of the theologian interlocutors in the rational categories that they share in common, or at least to explain the different rationalities employed in their discussions.

Unlike the previous form of dialogue, the researchers are not there to speak on behalf of the people who share their beliefs, but for their academic skills. The purpose of this dialogue is not to reach agreement on the faith of the other, but rather to understand the elements that distinguish

each of us and how each belief finds its coherence. When theologians meet the symbolic dimension of institutional dialogue dominates, and it must be remembered that none of those present “represents” his religion. This is the major difference from the previous type of interreligious dialogue. The Muslim theologian does not “represent” Muslim thought, but *a* Muslim thought, his own. The same goes for the Reformed, Jew or Catholic theologian.

From experience, I also know that this form of dialogue is much more interesting when the interlocutors have some knowledge of the religion of the other. I have attended exasperating sessions between Muslim and Christian theologians at which most of the misunderstandings could have been avoided had the speakers only known more about the other than *clichés*. This is precisely because the dialogue takes place between intellectuals in specialized fields. Were I to seat academics from different disciplines around the table, I should have no guarantee that the discussion would be fruitful. The most interesting meetings I have attended included Muslim theologians and Christian Islam-ologists. And once I attended a meeting between Catholic theologians and a Muslim Christian-ologist. It was fascinating. The translation difficulties were an added factor.... I shall not go into detail here, but I have some funny stories on this subject that I am ready to share!

3. The dialogue of joint projects/“The dialogue of action”

These interlocutors are social and political activists, members of Associations or of NGOs, who have undertaken common projects. At the Idéo Library, our working team was made up of Muslim and Christian archivists. There was no “inter-religious dialogue” as such but from the simple fact of working together we learned a lot about each other's sensibilities. Working together gave us a good opportunity to compare our respective scale of values and awareness of what impact our beliefs have on our daily life and scale of values.

This form of dialogue takes place between people who do not represent their religion, as was the case in the first form, and who, unlike the second form of dialogue, would often be hard put to give a rational account of their faith. However, the interaction between people involved in joint projects can be an opportunity to “talk about religion” and then really interesting discussions can arise, especially on ethical issues.

4. The (pseudo-) neighbourhood dialogue/“The dialogue of life”

The interlocutors have no element in common, except that they live in the same neighbourhood, the same buildings. They pass each other daily and see how each lives. Situations

of inter-religious dialogue can arise from this proximity, but despite that they may be all the more dangerous because all too quickly people tend to think that they are acquainted by virtue of this proximity alone. How many people think they know about Islam because they live in a country with a Muslim majority, or because they live next to a Muslim family? This form of “dialogue” is empty because it is largely non-verbal, uninformed, and its interlocutors are not linked by a common project. It is therefore necessary, in order not to be frustrated by this impasse, to be careful not to draw any conclusion.

Many people think they can judge Islam (or Christianity) simply because they live in a Muslim country, or just because there is a mosque near them! I mention this neighbourhood dialogue because it is common and because it may be an opportunity to build friendships, but as such there is a trap that you have to be well aware of, if you do not want it to be a new source of frustration.

5. Dialogue of friendship/“The dialogue of religious experience”

These interlocutors are friends, they know and appreciate each other, and this friendship can enable them to go very far in discussing their faith, their spiritual experiences and their doubts. Even if the two interlocutors are not trained in the study of their religion, they can have deep exchanges, also at the mystical level. This form of dialogue is extremely moving. Unfortunately, those who experience it tend to measure any other form of interreligious dialogue in the light of it, which is not only unfair but also false, because each type of dialogue has its relevance and value.

In this form of dialogue, the two friends do not “represent” their religion, even if it is obvious that their respective belief permeates them. Nor are they always well informed theologically, but their friendship and willingness to understand and love the other make it possible to overcome what would otherwise hinder academic dialogue.

6. The mixed-gender dialogue of couples

The interlocutors live together, which distinguishes them from simple friends. Besides they also have a project in common, which the friends do not necessarily have. One might query the pertinence of this sixth form of dialogue. The fact is, that in practice and in the daily experience of those who are responsible for inter-religious dialogue in France (I am thinking of the SNRM, the National Service for Relations with Muslims, which depends on the French Episcopal Conference), mixed couples are those who ask inter-religious questions the most, which I think justifies this level. The main and most sensitive question mixed couples have to confront is the

education of children. When it comes to transmitting values and belief, the spouses have to make some ethical choices which often reveal very profound difficulties regarding the religion of the partner, issues that are not felt so acutely before the birth of children.

Confusio confusionum

I think it is necessary to distinguish these forms of dialogue (without considering them complete at this point of my reflection) if one wishes to say something relevant. I do not think that inter-religious dialogue exists as a single consistent and useful concept, and confusing these different forms gives rise to frustration that ultimately discredits the dialogue as such.

One may only feel frustrated by institutional meetings if one expects more from them than what they can offer: the simple fact that religious leaders meet and embrace in front of the cameras. Since I have translated many official meetings between Catholic and Muslim leaders in Cairo, I can assure you that at no time doctrinal or ethical questions were discussed, and when sensitive points were discussed (freedom of conscience or respect for minorities for example), what was important, was that the questions were asked.

It is elsewhere, in other settings, that real discussion takes place. The Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue always insists that these meetings at the highest level be accompanied by working sessions between theologians, at which I also had the chance to participate recently. The results of our work were not published outside, not because they were sensitive, but quite simply because the issues dealt with were mainly epistemological, as it should be, between intellectuals, and that it was beyond the grasp of the wider public. They only hear what was said by the Pope and the Imam and end up wondering whether interreligious dialogue is of any interest, as I said about the Joint Declaration signed in Abu Dhabi.

Another recurring source of frustration arises from the spontaneous thought that religious leaders are capable of rational thinking about their faith, which is rarely the case. All priests, pastors, imams and rabbis do not have interesting things to say about their religion. Or to put it another way, an excellent pastor may have only a limited reflective capacity on his religious Tradition. Believers are asked much too soon, whether religious or not, to represent their religion and to say something worthwhile and rational to the followers of other religions and to non-believers. Here, once again, the public feels frustrated but cheered by the thought that religions have nothing meaningful to say and that at best they only address their own faithful. In any case, they would have nothing interesting to say to each other. On the other hand, when true theologians can be found, who also have some knowledge of the religion of the other interlocutor, the debate is absolutely fascinating.

I shall not dwell on the frustration that may arise from other forms of inter-religious dialogue, because they have nothing specific to add to any form of discussion: one must refrain from giving a label to the interlocutors, not attribute one's fears and views to them, but take the time to listen to everything. Never forgetting that the other person only represents himself, and not all the believers whose faith he shares.

Conclusion

In my view inter-religious dialogue, and in particular Islamo-Christian dialogue, suffers from a deplorable image because one tends to confuse different forms of dialogue that have almost nothing in common, except that the interlocutors are of different faiths. It seems to me that speaking about "inter-religious dialogue", with no precise purpose, is as vague as talking about "international dialogue" or "intercultural dialogue", that no researcher would approach, it seems to me, as though it were a matter of defined concepts. I therefore suggest we systematically specify which form of inter-religious dialogue we are dealing with: institutional, academic, project, neighbourly, friendly or conjugal.

I should like to make two closing observations, which I submit to you for discussion. My first remark concerns the Four Forms of Inter-religious Dialogue in *Dialogue and Mission* (which the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue published in 1984). They have become canonical (even though the text only presents them as the principal typical forms): a) "The dialogue of life", b) "The dialogue of action", c) "The dialogue of theological exchange", and d) "The dialogue of religious experience", (nn. 28-35). "The dialogue of life" as described in *Dialogue and Mission* seems to me to be a cross between (pseudo-) neighbourhood dialogue and the dialogue of friendship. Not to highlight this (pseudo-) neighbourhood dialogue seems to me naïve today, since we have unfortunately learned by now that it is not enough to live side by side to know each other. "The dialogue of action" in *Dialogue and Mission* corresponds to what I have called the dialogue of projects carried out jointly, with a more up-to-date vocabulary. In *Dialogue and Mission*, "The dialogue of theological exchange" among experts is what I call academic dialogue. The adjective 'academic' serves to remind us that theology is a science, with its own methods of verification and consistence. The fourth form of dialogue according to *Dialogue and Mission*, "The dialogue of religious experience", seems to me to be impossible unless it is rooted in friendship, and that is why I have chosen to call it the dialogue of friendship. I think it is essential to say this, to avoid experiencing, yet again, the frustration of noticing that every meeting of monks and Sufis does not necessarily result in anything much. And how could it be

otherwise? How could one open one's soul to another, were reciprocal friendship and esteem not already established between us? *Dialogue and Mission* does not mention the dialogue of the life of a couple, but I think it is important to distinguish this level, at least from a pastoral point of view. As for institutional dialogue, *Dialogue and Mission* did not envisage it, and this seems to me to be typical of a pioneering period if not at least of the impossibility of envisaging dialogue as a diplomatic and symbolic tool. And this brings me to my second observation.

Actually, we may be hypnotized by limited situations — pioneering situations?, in which the interlocutors were in fact religious leaders, qualified theologians and long-time friends, committed to practical projects. The words of these exceptional witnesses tend to distort our comprehension and prevent us from perceiving *the* different categories of inter-religious dialogue as they are, but kill them at the very moment it confuses them. Have not the great “masters of dialogue” — I am thinking of Massignon, Cardinal Newman, Paul VI and John Paul II, Martin Buber, Bruno Hussar and even of Imam Mūsā al-Ṣadr — ultimately made the task impossible for normal mortals like us? Have they not set the standard too high by combining in themselves the various facets of dialogue mentioned above? If *Dialogue and Mission* did not envisage the possibility that dialogue could not “but be” institutional, was it because the pioneers of dialogue, for the most part men endowed with an institutional stature, combined the other requisites of dialogue that ensure a dialogue bear fruit:— a critical spirit, theological preparation, friendship and respect for the other, his faith and ethical choices, as well as joint projects in which to engage, on a daily basis?