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POSSIBILITY OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: STRUCTURAL AND FORMAL CONDITIONS

ABSTRACT

In this paper the author explores the conditions under which inter-religious dialogue can be a transformative process not only of the interlocutor's understanding of the beliefs and values of the religiously different other but also her attitude toward him or her. The proposition elucidated and defended is that, to be transformative, the dialogue should be God-centered, objective, empathic, and it should be grounded in the values of equality, respect, and toleration. The paper is composed of two parts. The first is devoted to an analysis of the concept of dialogue in general and of inter-religious dialogue in particular: What are the *structural elements* of dialogue between (a) individuals and (b) religious communities? The second part is devoted to an analysis of the conditions under which inter-religious dialogue can be a transformative process. The focus in this analysis is on the following question: What does it take for a person who has grown up in a certain religion, who understands herself and in fact lives from the standpoint that religion, to discern the religious truth proclaimed by another religion, to comprehend it, appreciate it, assent to it, and incorporate it in the structure of her mind or worldview? We may construct a formidable strategy, one that wins the blessing of reason, still, the question remains: How can a community, which tends to be exclusivist in its religious orientation, change its understanding of God or attitude toward the religious different other?

Keywords: Dialogue, religion, formal structure, toleration, understanding, respect, equality, objectivity.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I explore the conditions under which inter-religious dialogue can be a transformative process, one in which what changes is not only the interlocutors' understanding of the beliefs and values of the religiously different other but also their attitude toward each other—the way they view, act, and

interact with each other, regardless of whether "the other" is a person, a community, or a religion. The proposition I shall defend is that, to be *transformative* the dialogue should be God-centered, objective, and empathic; it should, moreover, proceed in the spirit of respect, toleration, and equality. I shall*, first*, discuss the structural conditions of inter-religious dialogue: What do we mean when we speak of dialogue in general and inter-religious dialogue in particular? I raise this question because inter-religious dialogue takes place, as I shall explain in detail, at two levels. The first is discursive and its datum is concept, and the second is practical and its datum is action. The first takes place between theologians and philosophers, and the second takes place between religious communities. It is one thing for two scholars to dialogue on a concept or a question and another for two communities to "dialogue," or to communicate, at the level of action. I here assume that inter-religious dialogue cannot, and should not, stop at the level of theory between theologians and philosophers, for we can ask, What is the "cash value," to borrow a term from William James, of such dialogue if its fruits are not translated into modes of behavior in the sphere of action, where diverse religious communities live and interact as neighbors, religious groups, politicians, business persons, teachers, and organizations? Second, I shall discuss the formal conditions under which inter-religious dialogue can be a transformative process: What does it take for a person who has grown up in a certain religion, who understands herself and in fact lives from the standpoint of that religion to discern the religious truth proclaimed by another religion, comprehend it, appreciate it, and hopefully assent to it as a divine truth and then incorporate it in her mind or worldview? What is the use of a dialogue, or even the ritual of going through one, if we are not willing, or ready, to embrace a new truth we may discover both theoretically and practically? We may construct the structure of a formidable strategy, one that wins the blessing of Reason, still, the question remains: How can a religious community, which tends to be *exclusivist* in its religious orientation, to change its attitude or understanding of God and the meaning of human life and destiny and especially treat the truth of the other religions as a revelation of the Transcendent? This change is, I submit, a necessary condition for the possibility of mutual understanding, appreciation, respect, and cooperation between the different religions of the world. I shall refer to Christianity and Islam as examples in defending my thesis.

CONCEPT OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

It is, I think, reasonable to begin my discussion with a brief, elucidatory analysis of the concept of dialogue *as such*, because it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to theorize on the elements which make up the structure of inter-religious dialogue, its outcome, and the conditions which make it a transforma-

tive process, if we do not proceed in this discussion from a clear understanding of dialogue as such, that is, of the kind of ingredients or structure without which an encounter between human beings cannot be characterized as a dialogue. We may view this structure as the *ontological locus* within which the encounter *evolves* into a kind of dialogue.

"Religious" in "inter-religious dialogue" qualifies "dialogue" as a subject. Accordingly we understand the sense in which a dialogue is religious inasmuch as we understand the factor, or aspect, which makes it religious. We can say that it is religious because the interlocutors are religious people or members of a religious establishment or because the ideas discussed in the dialogue are religious in nature. For example, a philosopher may not be a religious person— does it necessarily follow that she cannot participate in a religious dialogue? It would seem that, at the level of individuals, what makes a dialogue religious is not the religious identity of the interlocutors, or their institutional status, but the subject matter of the dialogue. Thus a dialogue is philosophical inasmuch as the ideas discussed in it are philosophical, it is scientific inasmuch as the ideas discussed in it are scientific, political inasmuch as the ideas discussed in it are political, and so forth. But is the religious nature of the subject matter of inter-religious dialogue the only factor which *makes it religious*? An answer to this question should, I think, start with a focus on "inter" in "inter-religious dialogue." In a philosophical dialogue, as it is embodied in the Platonic model of dialogue, the interlocutors are individual human beings. But, first, what are they in inter-religious dialogue? Second, how are they related in this kind of event, or how do they dialogue with each other? The interlocutors in inter-religious dialogue cannot be only individuals. This is why when we speak of inter-religious dialogue we should mean the kind that takes place between, or inter, two religious communities. But if they are communities, the question necessarily arises: In what sense can they dialogue with each other? Moreover, unlike the dialogue that takes place between individuals, what makes inter-religious dialogue religious is not only the fact that its subject matter is religious ideas; moreover, the participants in it are *religious* communities, and more concretely the religious dimension of their lives. Thus, the signification of "religious" in inter-religious dialogue is not restricted to the religious character of the subject matter but includes the participants of the dialogue.

We readily understand someone when she speaks of a dialogue between two individuals, but can we readily understand her when she speaks of dialogue between two communities? This question is warranted because there is a radical difference between an individual and a community, for we can ask: Can a community think, feel, and speak with one voice? In the Platonic model of dialogue the aim is, generally speaking, clear: to grow in understanding or to establish the truth or validity of an idea or a hypothesis. But is this the only aim of inter-religious dialogue? We may, as I shall discuss, say that in addition to understanding or discerning the truth of an idea, inter-religious dialogue aims at

changing one's attitude and hopefully one's behavior toward the members of the other community. If this is the case, and I think it is, as I shall argue, we should grant that inter-religious dialogue is made up of two basic components, the first is theoretical or conceptual and the second is practical. In inter-religious dialogue we aim at understanding the other religious community and hopefully the way we interact with its members in the domain of praxis. This essential, yet peculiar, feature of inter-religious dialogue sheds a new light on the significance of the question I raised earlier: In what *sense* is *inter-religious dialogue a dialogue?* In my response to this question I shall (a) discuss the general idea of dialogue, (b) explain the sense in which two communities can dialogue with each other, and (c) analyze the conditions under which it can be a transformative power in the attitudes and action of the dialoguing communities.

IDEA OF DIALOGUE

"Dialogue" is a translation of the Greek word *dialogos*, which derives from *dialogesthai*, which in turn derives from *dia* (between) and *legein* (talk); that is, dialogue is a discourse—talk or discussion—between two or more persons. Again, the word *legein* is the source of the word logic, viz., the science of correct reasoning—of correct thinking or talking. This is why we can characterize dialogue as a rational conversation, one governed by the principles of reason (*logos*). We usually distinguish between idle talk and meaningful talk. Idle talk is pointless; therefore, it is worthless. Dialogue is meaningful talk. It is the kind of conversation that aims at the truth, or understanding, something good or significant. When people engage in meaningful talk they usually analyze, reason, criticize, and evaluate important ideas: beliefs, questions, propositions, hypotheses, values, or points of view. The discussion is guided by an aim, and the aim is to discover or ascertain the truth, falsity, or meaning of a claim or belief.

Regardless of whether it is philosophical, scientific, or theological, dialogue is a rational conversation in which concepts are interchanged and discussed. By "discussion" I do not *merely* mean the exchange of ideas or points of view, or merely their presentation, but especially their analysis, criticism, and evaluation and the attempt to discern the truth inherent in them. The instrument, or power, by which this activity takes place, is reason. This is why, once more, dialogue is justifiably called "rational conversation," that is, a conversation conducted in the light of *logos*. Rational conversation is the formal structure within which ideas are presented and discussed. It may take place by means of questions and answers, arguments, conceptual or logical analysis, or by inducing the intellect to higher levels of understanding. The interlocutors are "dialecticians" inasmuch as they submit to the voice of reason (Plato, *Republic*, Chapters V and VII).

A distinctive feature of dialogue is that it is a purposeful encounter. Two or more people meet in order to establish the truth or falsity of an idea, theory, or

claim, or in order to understand it. This activity involves, as I have just pointed out, clarification, definition, analysis, evaluation, argumentation, and systematization of the ideas under consideration. Accordingly a clear formulation of *the purpose* of the dialogue is critically important, so that all the participants proceed into the discussion with a clear understanding of the question they seek to explore. Failure to clarify the purpose will certainly undermine the focus of the participants on the subject matter of the dialogue and consequently on the character of the encounter, or meeting, *qua dialogue*. Moreover, when the interlocutors do not address the same idea or adhere to the purpose of the meeting, that is, converse rationally on a particular subject matter, the dialogue will necessarily be reduced to a monologue or idle talk.

A second distinctive feature of dialogue is that the truth the interlocutors seek *emerges* in the course of the conversation as a kind of *disclosure*. They "see," or "discern," it as a luminous presence. It emerges as a result of the analytical, critical, and reasoned interchange of the ideas under consideration, as result of the logical movement of thought that develops in the dialogue; in fact it emerges *in and through* this movement. It may appear at its end as an intuition that can be articulated into a concept or in the process of the conversation as a shining presence of the truth, the kind that retransforms the intuition into knowledge. This is why, as I shall argue, a necessary condition for inter-religious dialogue is that the interlocutors bracket their personal biases, emotions, and desires before and during the dialogue.

A third distinctive feature of dialogue is that it is not always a smooth or direct development toward a certain end, viz., the truth or the understanding the interlocutors seek, but frequently a rough, nebulous, unpredictable, because there is frequently a need to clarify vague or ambiguous concepts, to consider hidden assumptions, to broach neglected questions or ideas, or to unravel certain complex propositions. The dialectical process is always expansive in its ideas, insights, and possibilities of understanding. An excursus from the main course of the conversation now and then is not uncommon in the major philosophical, scientific, and theological dialogues.

IDEA OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Now in what sense can two communities engage in a religious dialogue? If they can, what may the structure of such dialogue be? In the Platonic model of dialogue, or any dialogue that takes place between individuals, the conversation *consists* of a clearly defined purpose, a commitment to the principles of reason in the activity of analysis, criticism, and evaluation, a focus on the logic implicit in the ideas or issues under consideration without allowing one's idiosyncrasies to interfere in the discussion, and a commitment to the truth that emerges in the course of the dialogue. The emphasis in this statement is on "consists"—on the

structure within which a dialogue between two communities can take place, mainly because a community (a) does not, in fact, think, feel, know, and speak in one voice, (b) may not even be interested in the dialogue, since it might believe that it is already in possession of the Truth, and (c) may not be skilled in the art of rational conversation.

A quick, investigative look at the abundant research done in the area of inter-religious dialogue will show that most writers on this subject have adopted the Platonic model of dialogue in their theorizing on this type of dialogue, and indeed most of the conferences held on this subject during the past five decades took place between theologians and philosophers and sometimes political leaders. But, as Hendrik Vroom has correctly pointed out, "Academic dialogical studies may end up in books, and nobody knows where the spirit of dialogue leaves its traces" (Vroom, in: Cornille, 2009, 214). But inter-religious dialogue is not only an academic question; it is also, and more urgently, an existential concern that, first, expresses an essential aspiration of the religious dimension of human nature and, second, does not merely aim at the understanding the philosopher or theologian seeks but also at using this understanding to create a particular atmosphere in which the different religious communities can live and thrive together as human beings. Moreover, the call for inter-religious did not, and should not, issue from philosophical, theological, or political curiosity. Even philosophers like Hegel who argued that the Absolute manifests itself differently in the different cultures of the world did not broach the question of inter-religious dialogue but, on the contrary, viewed Christianity as the highest revelation of God's will on earth. The call for inter-religious dialogue should issue from the encounter with the religious other—the other whose religious beliefs and way of worshipping God are different from ours. This encounter, which seems to be growing in frequency, depth, breadth, and urgency as a positive consequence of globalization in the fields of economics, politics, science and technology, education, information, transportation, and telecommunication, and the continual fusion of the different types of human relationships in these very fields, is the *raison d'etre* of inter-religious dialogue. Hardly any country in the world is immune to cultural, religious, political, and economic diversity. The boundaries, which used to separate the different countries, religions, cultures, and economies, as well as societies, are now opaque, porous. The separate other, whether it is he, she, or they is now as close to us as one's TV screen, computer, airplane, or smart phone, with whom we can personally interact, play, marry, work, or collaborate on scientific or business projects and with whom we struggle for more justice, freedom, and prosperity. In short, the separate other is now my neighbor—"my brother-and-sister-in-humanity." But how can the communal other be our neighbor if we cannot live harmoniously under the conditions of equality, freedom, respect, peace, justice, and mutual aid, that is, if we cannot coexist as human beings? Yes, the question that glares us in the face at the present is not merely how we can get along economically, politically, and

socially, and even culturally, although these goals are intrinsically desirable, but how we can live together as human beings. The impulse to this type of living is what morally justifies inter-religious dialogue; and founding it in this impulse will certainly pave the way not only to a successful dialogue but also to a more peaceful and progressive world. This impulse should also be the basis on which one can explore the conditions under which the diverse religious communities can interact and cooperate on the development of a more human society (See Nowak, 2001).

One of the thorniest factors which underlie the tension we frequently witness between the various cultures of the world and necessarily challenges the possibility of inter-religious dialogue is "religious exclusivity," the quiet but firm claim that one's religion is the true religion, in the sense that it is in possession and the custodian of God's Will or Word on earth and that, consequently, it is the true way to salvation and eternal happiness; it also underlies, at least to some extent, the religious wars which punctuate the history of societies in the East and the West in the ancient, medieval, and modern periods; finally, it underlies the spread of religious missions throughout the Eastern and Western worlds, whose supreme aim had been to convert "the religious other" to the "true religion." An exclusive claim to the divine truth necessarily generates a feeling of superiority socially, morally, and culturally in relation to the different other. The other is viewed as "underdeveloped" as a human being.

But is "religious exclusivism" a valid religious orientation or point of view, in the sense that a certain religion can have an absolute claim to the Divine Truth? (See Hick, 1974; 1989; 1992; Badham, 1998; Heinze, 2005). Although it darts at the heart of the question of the possibility of inter-religious dialogue, I cannot discuss this question in any detail here, due to limitation of space, but I think it will be helpful to the development of the thesis of my paper to make a distinction between what I shall call hard and soft exclusivism. A hard exclusivist claims that her religion is the "the true" religion and that all the other religions are either false or incomplete, or misguided. Accordingly its way is the true way to salvation and happiness. A soft exclusivist claims that her religion is not necessarily The True religion, but that it is a true and adequate basis for her own salvation and happiness, and that other religions are, or can be, true revelations of the Divine will and therefore adequate bases for the salvation and happiness of the other peoples of the world. The soft exclusivist grounds her claim in the metaphysical assumption that God is a transcendent being, that the human mind cannot comprehend his essence in the fullness of its being, that God reveals his will differently in the different cultures of the world in the course of history. She would concede, in defense of her claim, that since God is a transcendent being, that he is infinite in power, wisdom, and goodness, that he is the creator of the universe, it is reasonable to hold that he reveals his will differently in the different cultures of the world. The soft exclusivist focuses her attention more on understanding the meaning of human life and destiny, on the

spiritual dimension of human nature, on how the message of a religion is translated into moral, religious, and social values, on the fact that human nature is universal and that it is a divine spark, than on whether the theological questions of her religion are the final word of God; any revelation, in so far as it is divine, is in a sense final, absolute. Soft exclusivists, sometimes referred to as inclusivists or pluralists, tend to believe that the diversity of religions is a testimony to God's infinite wisdom and creativity. This aspect was emphasized by philosophers such as Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and John Cobb (Whitehead, 1929; Hartshorne, 1941, 1967; Cobb, 1982, 82). Who said that the Transcendent speaks only one "language," which he expresses himself only in one way, or that the way he speaks or the way he expresses himself can in any way be anthropomorphized? The very fact of the mosaic of the different religions is a vivid indication of his infinite wisdom, greatness, and love. Two comments are in order.

First, soft exclusivism is assumed when any theologian, philosopher, or community engages in an inter-religious dialogue, for by its nature hard exclusivism rules out the possibility of such dialogue, mainly because if someone seriously believes that her religion is "the true" religion, she would not, *ipso facto*, need to discuss any aspect of the other religion; she has nothing new to learn and she has much to give. She may talk, out of curiosity, with the religious other in order to know what she believes or how she lives or becomes happy or how to secure her eternal life, and she may inform the other of her beliefs and values, but this kind of talk remains at the level of theory the way it sometimes happens in scientific or philosophical research and it may be used by some leaders in the implementation of some social or political policy, that is, as an instrument of control, but this is not what is intended in inter-religious dialogue. Moreover, can an exclusivist *in principle* dialogue with the religious other? *Second*, soft exclusivism provides a solid basis for the possibility of inter-religious dialogue, because the interlocutors proceed into it, as I shall explain in some detail, with a tolerant, empathic, and open mind, with a mind that is willing to see the new truth and embrace it or acknowledge it, because she discerns it as a truth. Religious difference, which is the basis of religious particularity, is also what justifies getting together to seek mutual understanding.

INGREDIENTS OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

In the analysis of the structure of inter-religious dialogue it is not enough to say that it is a rational conversation and that it is rational in character; it is equally important to identify the participants who conceive and realize its aim, its subject matter, and the conditions under which it takes place. Well, the participants in this kind of dialogue are not only theologians and philosophers, although their work is a necessary condition for its realization, but primarily

religious communities. But, as I pointed out earlier, it is extremely difficult for the members of a community to think, feel, reason, and think in one voice. Let us not lose sight of the fact that the ultimate purpose of inter-religious dialogue is not merely "to understand" the beliefs and values of the religious other but also to comprehend the divine truth implicit in her religion and hopefully to change one's attitude toward it. But the comprehension of a new truth entails accepting it and acting on it, otherwise the act of understanding becomes an instance of what I would call "cognitive voyeurism." But, this is not the aim of inter-religious dialogue; its, as I shall expound, to enhance our understanding, respect, appreciation, and *human living* with the religious other—to demolish a wall that separates us from each other as human beings, and ironically as God's creation, as a creation that reflects God's image; to experience the divine in our lives; and to cooperate on creating a more human society.

Now, in what way can a religious community rise to the level of dialogue, or, how can it exist in the mode of dialogue, since it in fact exists discretely and thrives in large areas, cities, or even countries, so that the basic conditions of the Platonic kind of dialogue can be fulfilled? Or, what does it take for a religious community to understand, appreciate, and respect not only the truth implicit in the other religion but also the members that espouse it? I raise these questions because dialogue in the form of conferences, symposia, or meetings between religious thinkers is not enough. The result of their dialogue should be *transmuted* into the minds and hearts of the members of the dialoguing community and it should win their assent—hopefully by intellectual enlightenment, not by conditioning, manipulation, or brainwashing. Only when this happens can we say that a dialogue between two religious communities takes place. Accordingly we should ask: What are the vehicles, or channels, in and through which can this transmutation take place? A quest for these channels is, I think, a step toward identifying the interlocutors of inter-religious dialogue.

First, Interpreters of Religious Truth. The first, and we should say *basa*l, constitutive ingredient of the formal structure of inter-religious dialogue is authoritative philosophers and theologians. I say "basal" because their analysis and evaluation, and especially their interpretation of the basic beliefs and values of a religion is a *sine qua non*, and we can add the first logical condition, for the possibility of dialogue, because without a clearly defined interpretation of these beliefs and values there would not be anything clear or substantial to converse about. These beliefs and values underlie not only the worldview of a community but also its religious culture, because the symbols, rites, celebrations, norms, practices, rituals, and the way its members understand and practice their religion are concrete embodiments, or expressions, of these beliefs and values. If we take them away, the religion collapses. The author of a philosophy may perish but his or her philosophy itself may survive. The ancient Greek, Roman, and Medieval philosophers perished but not their philosophies. A religion is a way

of life; its foundation is a set of beliefs and values. These exist in the minds and hearts of the faithful and become actual in the way they act or behave religiously. When the religious community perishes its religion as a way of life perishes. Where are the ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian religions? I do not exaggerate in saying that the doorway to our understanding of a religion is its basic beliefs and values. We cannot comprehend how the members of a community fast, pray, perform rites such as marriage, baptism, or death, or how they understand the meaning of human life and destiny without a genuine understanding of these beliefs and values. For example, we understand why the Muslim prays the way he does in the mosque, at home, in public, and in nature only if we understand the creed "There is no god but God, and Mohammad is his messenger" and his conception of the afterlife. Similarly, we understand why a Catholic or an Orthodox Christian prays in church, at home, or in public the way he does only if we understand the belief that Jesus is the Son of God and that God is The Father. The prayer in these two cases embodies the meaning of the creed or the belief. The Muslim or the Christian lives, enacts, this belief in the event of praying. The prayer is an occasion for the faithful to experience the divine in their lives. The point which calls for special attention here is that the fruits and spirit of the dialogical event—understanding, respect, appreciating and accepting of the religious other—should be transmuted into the minds and hearts of the religious community, otherwise, inter-religious dialogue would remain abstract and therefore irrelevant to the lives of the its members. Toward the achievement of this goal, the theologians and philosophers should, in some way, devote themselves to a serious interpretation of the beliefs and values they represent. The interpretation should include a discussion of the major differences and commonalities between the dialoguing communities. This comparative discussion will enhance one's understanding of one's religion *as well as* the religion of the other. It will also help the mind of the faithful to see that difference does not have to be a source of alienation or hostility but can expand their understanding and appreciation of the presence of the Divine in their lives.

The selection of the basic beliefs and values whose interpretation is essential for the mutual understanding of a religion in the medium of dialogue is a painstaking task, for it frequently involves translation of technical, abstract, recalcitrant concepts and questions into communicable language, one that can be understood by the "lay" person; identification of the differences and commonalities between the religions; explanation of some of the metaphysical, theological, and cultural assumptions whose elucidation is a requisite for interpreting and, consequently, for understanding the beliefs and values under consideration.

Second, the Religious Establishment. If we were to follow Aristotle's analysis of Causation (or creation), I would say that (a) the interpretation of the beliefs and values the theologians and philosophers provide would be the material cause (or condition), (b) the interlocutors would be the efficient cause,

(c) the subject matter interchanged would be the formal cause, and (d) the mutual understanding of the truth would be the final cause. Now, in and by itself, the interpretation of the beliefs and values cannot move into the minds and hearts of the religious community; an agent should initiate and undertake this movement, of course in terms of her vision of the final cause. In addition to the religious thinkers who interpret the beliefs and values, the second logical condition for this task is, in my judgment, the religious establishment, or the clergy— that is, the leaders who are in charge of administering, teaching, justifying, and guarding a religion as an institution and as a way of life: popes, imams, priests, pastors, sheikhs, rabbis, holy men and women, muftis, bishops. These function as mediators between the revealed truth and the faithful not only in their role as models but also in the way they teach the revealed truth. At the existential level they are the most direct, and consequently most effective, point of contact between the beliefs and values, on the one hand, and the members of the community, on the other. They are in a position to influence the attitude of the members of their congregation toward the religiously different other. This is why it is urgently important for the religious leaders who occupy the highest seat of authority to initiate the development of a program that aims at orienting their clergy in the basic beliefs and values of the other religion and at promoting the values of toleration and respect for the religiously different other as such. These leaders can play a decisive role in creating a spiritual environment in which genuine inter-religious dialogue can be happen. I would not be very mistaken if I say that that the active involvement of these leaders not only legitimizes but also inspires the dialogue at the communal level. Let me illustrate this point by an example: the recent meeting at the Vatican between Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb, the highest ranking religious authority in Sunni Islam at Al-Azhar. The two leaders embraced! This is a highly symbolic but profoundly meaningful gesture. Though the meeting was short, they discussed "the common challenges faced by the authorities and the faithful of the major religions of the world (*Assafir*, May 23, 2016). The message of the meeting, it was announced, was the meeting itself. There is no need to analyze what the Pope and the Sheikh discussed, but it is important to emphasize that it was cordial, constructive, and promised future cooperation between the two religions. In Sheikh Al-Tayeb's words, "We need to take a joint stance, hand-in-hand, to bring happiness to humanity, not to cause them hardship." (Ibid.) The phrase "hand-in-hand" should be spotlighted, for this image offers a firm basis for dialogue between Christianity and Islam and hopefully between other religions. It suggests amiability, trust, cooperation, and good will. I only hope that this meeting does not remain just a meeting—a symbolic gesture. The point is to initiate concrete steps that translate the meaning it embodies into modes of behavior.

But this is not the first meeting between the Pope and an Al-Azhar Sheikh, for similar meetings were held in the past; and it was not the only meeting between Christian and Muslim thinkers and leaders, or even between Christian

and Muslim communities. Indeed such meetings have been flourishing in Europe, Canada, U.S.A., and some parts of the Middle East during the past decades. Although intrinsically desirable and an essential condition for the possibility of inter-religious dialogue, they are in need of systematization, so that the various Muslim and Christian denominations can arrive at a statement of the general teachings of Islam and Christianity. Such a statement is needed to chart a strategy for initiating and moving the dialogue from the sphere of theory to that of praxis. For example, emphasis on values such as toleration, justice, peace, cooperation on worthwhile projects, love, freedom of belief, not to mention institutions such as Sunday School, Bible School, or Madrassa in the educational system and the family, is a most desirable first step. This step can be supplemented by inter-religious encounters and visitations. For example, when I was an undergraduate student at Union College, a Methodist institution, in 1963, my Anthropology teacher, Professor Hugh Gormley, extended an invitation to the class to attend a religious service at the Baptist Church where he served as an elder. He wanted to know how many of us would attend the service, so he could reserve seats for his students. The class, about twenty students, received the invitation with painful silence. The professor was surprised, in fact embarrassed. "The purpose of the invitation," he added with trembling lips, "is not to convert you to the Baptist religion but *to be acquainted* with the Baptist religion." Well, ten students raised their hands. I was one of them. At the end of the service Professor Gormley introduced us to the congregation with a feeling of pride. Many of the worshippers approached us and welcomed us to the Church and asked many questions about Union and Barbourville. On our way back to the dormitory one student remarked: "The Baptists are not very much different from us!" Another, a Presbyterian, retorted: "Basically, the Baptists are similar to the Presbyterians." A third, a Congregational, interjected: "All of us are all Christians!" There is no need to recount the details of the conversation. The point which deserves special attention here is that *that* interdenominational visit initiated an inter-religious dialogue between the students; it also shattered the social and psychological distance between the students and, along with it, the element of "fear of the unknown" that is usually stirred in us when we meet the different other. What if Christian students were to visit a mosque on Friday or a synagogue on Saturday or a Buddhist temple and witness the way they worship the Transcendent, the Creator of the Universe? What if they discern that all of them worship the same *transcendent being*?

Third, the Educational Establishment. In addition to the religious thinkers and the religious establishment, the educational system, *qua* efficient cause, plays a vital role in transmuting the mutual understanding achieved by the theologians and philosophers and which is articulated in their interpretation of the basic beliefs and values of the dialoguing religions. First, by "educational" I mean the process in which the young grow and develop as human beings. The

domain of this process is not exclusive of the Academy—school, college, institute, and university—but extends to (a) the family and (b) the extensive and expansive network of communication (internet, TV, magazines, books, newspapers, radio, smart phones, movies). I here assume that (a) education is a life-long process and (b) regardless of its kind, any factor which plays an effective role in the growth and development of the human being is essentially educative in nature. We do not stop learning or growing when we graduate from high school or university. The greatest merit of the Academy is that it equips our minds with the intellectual skills we need to grow as *human individuals*.

The educational channels, or forces, constitute, in different ways and degrees, a direct point of contact with the members of the religious community. Our attitude toward the religious other is, to some extent, shaped by the immediate social environment: parents, teachers, peers, books, movies, and public opinion. One of the most constructive steps a society should take, directly or indirectly, is to prohibit, or at least discourage, stereotyping, discrimination, dissemination of false ideas, racism, ethnocentrism, bigotry, prejudice. Next, it is vitally important to implement "religious enrichment" programs at the high school and college levels, which inform the students about the basic beliefs and values practiced by the religious other in society. This kind of program is a quiet instigator of inter-religious dialogue at the level of *praxis*. I have read this morning, as I was working on this paper, that the Head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany, Bavarian Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm has declared in *Heilbronne Stimme* newspape*r* (Friday, May 27, 2016) that Islam should be taught critically and scientifically in all German schools, that the Islamic communities should establish a kind of "Friday School" (Madrassa) where young people can be informed about their religion, and that the universities should establish Islamic Theology faculties, for he thinks that the Islamic tradition should "be approached critically and on scientific criteria." He added that "tolerance, religious freedom and freedom of consciousness must apply to all confessions. These rules can best be implemented when you have religion as a part of public education." Bishop Bedford-Strohm thinks that this part of the student's education can be a factor in immunizing pupils from radical leanings. I strongly endorse the bishop's proposal, not only because it helps in warding off religious radicalism but especially because it expands our own understanding of ourselves as human beings, because it reveals a new dimension of the divine presence in our lives, and because it is intrinsically valuable to our knowledge of the religiously different other. I really think that the values of toleration, freedom of conscience, justice, respect for humanity, and cooperation should be promoted as a matter of scientific, religious, and political policy not merely as a means to an end, where the end is warding off extremism, or promoting peace, or some political policy but as an end in itself, primarily because these values are essential conditions of our humanity; they express essential needs of human nature.

SOME BASIC CONDITIONS OF INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

If inter-religious dialogue is restricted to a rational encounter between religious thinkers or leaders, if it should also engage the members of the dialoguing communities, if its aim is not only to understand the truth implicit in the other religion but also to assent and translate this understanding into concrete modes of behavior, that is, to change one's attitude toward the different other, the question necessarily arises: Under what conditions is this type of dialogue possible? Or, under what conditions can it be a transformative power in the lives of the religious communities, so that their members assume an attitude of respect, toleration, appreciation, and cooperation with the religiously different other? Notice, although this question is cast within the parameters of religious discourse, it can, and in fact does, have both political and social ramifications, for a harmonious and cooperative relation between the diverse religious groups in a society promotes the material and spiritual dimensions of human life. Let us not forget that social order, stability, and solidarity are necessary conditions for social progress. I underscore this point only to stress that respect for the religiously different other should not be sought or practiced only as a means to an end, for if this were to happen, it would cease when the end ceases, but especially as an end in itself, mainly because it is an intrinsically valuable end, and it is so valuable because it is an imperative of our humanity.

First, Mutual Understanding. The material condition, without which inter-religious dialogue cannot begin, is, as I argued in the preceding pages, a clear statement of the basic beliefs and values of the two religions. Only when the interlocutors analyze, explain, critically evaluate, systematically interpret, and grasp the truth implicit in them can we say that understanding has taken place. This implies that they cannot proceed into the dialogue without a clear knowledge of their own beliefs and values. This requirement is, to a reasonable extent, fulfilled at the level of theoretical discourse by the theologians and philosophers, but it is not fulfilled, at least not adequately, at the level of the community, which is the main target of the dialogue. One may be a devout Muslim or Christian or Jew or Hindu without having adequate knowledge of the theology that explains and justifies her religious way of life. We do not choose where and when we are born: we do not choose our parents, society, or culture. We simply discover, when we pass through our adolescence, that we are religious *in a certain way*. But possessing a certain religious identity is generically different from knowing the source, texture, or justification of this identity. This is a main reason why the major religions have educational programs, e.g., Madrasa or Sunday School, whose purpose is to enlighten the faithful about the fundaments of their religion. In addition to the pulpit, such programs can be used as *loci* to which the fruits of the theoretical dialogue can be extended. Many a church, mosque, and synagogue in North America and Europe have already initiated

such programs. The program developed by the cooperative effort of the Church and Mosque in Ireland—*A Journey Together: Muslims, Christians in Ireland, Building Mutual Respect, Understanding and Cooperation*—can be cited as an example (Forde, 2013). The establishment of such programs in religiously pluralistic societies will not only serve peace and order but will also further human growth and development.

Implicit in the implementation of this comprehensive approach to interreligious dialogue are (a) a quiet rejection of hard exclusivism and (b) a practical acceptance of the belief that in so far as he is the Absolute, God has revealed himself differently to the different cultures of the world. How can I engage in a dialogue with the religiously different other, one that aims at mutual understanding, respect, appreciation, and cooperation, if the truth she embraces is not expressive of the Divine? I raise this question because I am anxious to spotlight the conditions under which a member of one religious community can comprehend a constitutive truth of the other religion not only from the standpoint of that religion but also as a divine truth, as a truth which flows from the same source that gives rise to her own religious truth. This statement refers specifically to the kind of understanding that conduces to a change of attitude—of respect, appreciation, and equality of humanity. Two conditions should be fulfilled in order for this type of understanding to take place.

The first is a *plea for objectivity* in the analysis and evaluation of the basic beliefs and values under consideration. What does it take to assume an objective attitude, one in which the interlocutors bracket out their desires, biases, prejudices, hidden assumptions, in short their idiosyncrasies, and focus their attention on the meaning, truth, and falsity of these beliefs and values? The participants assume this attitude when they submit, in principle, to the logic implicit in the beliefs and values without the intervention of any factor or authority external to it; that is, the course of the dialogue cannot be dictated by any authority external to this logic. The participants undertake the activity of analysis and evaluation, yes, but they do not dictate its course. Moreover, they pursue the line of reasoning that evolves in the discourse to the end, and they make judgments, but they cannot be judgmental. Truth, as it is baptized by the hand of reason, is, for them, the ultimate court of appeal in both theoretical and practical matters. In their role as participants they function as logical midwives. They cannot determine either the direction or the outcome of the discourse; they make it possible. They *enable* the logic of the discourse to take its course. Emphasis on this condition was one of Plato's lasting legacies to the possibility of philosophical and scientific inquiry. Let me spotlight this point by brief example. Suppose the interlocutors arrive at a mutually acceptable definition, or characterization, of "God," "Son of God," or "There is no god but God, and Mohammad is his messenger," what can we infer from the logic of anyone of these definitions with respect to our understanding of the revealed truth in the monotheistic religions?

Second, in order for the dialogue to be conducive to mutual understanding it should be *God-centered,* not religion-centered. This condition, which was elaborated and defended by John Hick, (Hick, 1989; 1974; 1992; Badham, 1998; Barnes, 1989), requires that the interlocutors view, and treat, each other's beliefs and values not from the standpoint of their own particular religions but from the standpoint of God, from the assumption that all the major religions are divine revelations. This means that they cannot interpret the beliefs and values of the other religion *in terms of* their own religion. Doing this will certainly expose them to the charge of the "religio-centric" predicament. When I am stuck in this predicament, that is, when I see with the eyes of my religion or when I hear with the ears of my religion, I cannot understand the religion of the other as *the other* understands it but as I understand it. Assuming this kind of dialogical posture entails a kind of religious imperialism. One may object that since every religion is god-centered, it is easy to slip into the religio-centric predicament—thus, can we be God-centered except from the standpoint of our conception of God? Or, can we transcend the religio-centric predicament? Yes, the supreme purpose of the dialogue is to transcend this kind of predicament, and this in and through the process analysis, criticism, and evaluation or, in Plato language, through the dialectic process generated by the discussion. The point is to penetrate, through logical and linguistic analysis, into the meaning of the divine truth inherent in the other religion. This penetration is possible if one abandons the dogma that ours is the only true divine revelation and if we proceed into it with open minds and hearts. This is exactly why the dialogue cannot stop at the level of conceptual analysis but that it should be transmuted into modes of existential dialogue, in which we do not only think but also see and feel the divine truth in so far as it is embodied in the other religion. This is why the dialogue should not, as I argued earlier, stop at the level of intellectual understanding but extends to the sphere of praxis where members of the religious communities are expected to practice the values of respect, toleration, equality, freedom, and appreciation of the other. It is critically important to emphasize that assuming a God-centered attitude does not in any way undermine the cognitive authority of a religion, nor does it undermine the authority of the religion in the life of the community, because the religions-in-dialogue are divine revelations; they derive their authority from that revelation and from nowhere else. They are *equal in relation to God*. Moreover, "difference" does not logically imply opposition or contradiction, nor does it necessarily imply "better" or "worse." This aspect has not escaped the attention of the theologians who have been engaged in inter-religious dialogue during the past forty years. For example, Mustafa Abu-Sway argues that "the Islamic worldview presents humanity as a family united through the same parents, rich with commonalities, and yet has many differences. Though many of these differences are postrevelational constructs created by human beings, The Qur'an recognizes that some of these differences are positively created by God, and, therefore, they command a plu-

ralistic paradigm" (Abu-sway in: Cornille, 2009, 134). This argument is based on a Qur'anic text: "O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct/piety. Lo! Allah is Knower! Aware!" (Qur'an, 49:13). This recognition, that no one religion has an exclusive monopoly on the divine truth, is endorsed by the World Council of Churches meeting in 1985 at which the members stated "the conviction that God as creator of all is present and active in the plurality of religions makes it inconceivable to us that God's saving activity could be confined to anyone continent, cultural type, or group of peoples" (Quoted in: Pratt, 2014, 15). Accordingly the religiously different other should not be viewed as a threat or as a source of fear. On the contrary, difference should stir interest, curiosity. The differentia, in virtue of which the other is an "other," is always the basis of a new knowledge. I am inclined to think that the interlocutors should pay special attention to the similarities—for example, on the universality of human nature, human values, and the infinite wisdom of God; on the need to cooperate on valuable social projects; on charting a road to a more peaceful world order. Friendship fosters the possibility of mutual understanding. Direct, constructive cooperation is conducive to friendship, and friendship is a basic moral value in all the major religions. And yet, understanding the differences cannot, and should not, be neglected, especially those that underlie the claim to exclusivity. We fear what we do not know; and we cannot respect, appreciate, or tolerate what we fear and what we do not know. Thus knowledge of similarities as well as differences will not only remove the source of fear, and so of alienation between the different religious communities but will also deepen mutual understanding in the sphere of *praxis*.

   Second, Equality. If we grant that all the major religions are ways in which God reveals himself to human beings differently in the different parts of the world, if the truth they embody is sacred, in the sense that it acts as an absolute source of respect and reverence in the life of the faithful, next, if the interlocutors mutually recognize the validity of this claim, then it would be reasonable to say that they should not proceed into the dialogue from an attitude or a position of superiority, because assuming this position would transform the dialogue into a session of dictation, a show of sophistry, an attempt at delicate manipulation, or an occasion of rivalry or competition. In fact it will trivialize the claim of the other that his truth is a divine revelation. However, let me at once state that by "equality" I do not mean the equal size of the religious communities, for one of them may be a minority, nor do I mean the size of the theological literature within which a divine truth is articulated or interpreted, but *equality in terms of the ontological presence* of divine revelation. No one revealed truth is more or less important than another; each one is infinitely valuable, therefore, equal, because it is a divine revelation: I treat the religious other as my equal because

I discern the divine presence in his or her way of life. This discernment is the foundation of equality between the religions; it is also the basis of (a) *respect* and (b) *toleration*.

First, what does it mean to respect the religiously different other? It means that I uphold the being of the other, that is, I esteem and honor her for her own sake, for what she stands for, for the beliefs and values which constitute her religious identity. Moreover, I respect the other when I show concern for her well-being spiritually and materially, when I promote, so far as I can, the integrity of her way of life, otherwise, resect becomes a ritual of social mannerism. In the course of the dialogue I show respect to my interlocutor when, in my questions, criticism, proposals for new ways of analysis, I aim at the truth, at understanding what the other has to offer, when in seeking the truth I submit to the authority of reason. I respect the other when I strive for the enactment and implementation of the laws that guarantee freedom of conscience and when I take a firm and active stand against discrimination, bigotry, prejudice, injustice, and oppression, and when I create the conditions for her to grow as a human being.

Second, I do not exaggerate if I say that "toleration" derives its meaning from the concept of respect. A large number of people understand "toleration" as "putting up with," "let alone," "bear," of "suffer silently," but these and similar definitions strip off the moral content of the concept. If I simply put up with a group of people, I assume a passive attitude toward them; I distance myself from them. I extricate myself from any moral responsibility toward them. Accordingly I become indifferent to them; I take a "hands off" attitude toward them. This attitude can be articulated by expressions such as "What is he to me? Why should I care?" and similar expressions. Unfortunately this attitude is prevalent in contemporary society. It is, as Hegel would say, characteristic of "civil society," not of "the state" or "the human community."

But if we trace "toleration" to its etymological source, *tollere*, we discover that it means "to lift up." When a person falls I do not assume an indifferent but different attitude toward her. I care for her; I lift her up. Implied in the concept of toleration is an attitude of concern; but "to be concerned" implies to be interested, and "to be interested in" implies that the object of interest is important, valuable. Recognition of this value is the basis of concern. When I notice, on a hike in the forest in a dreary autumn day, a leaf falling from a tree I do not assume an attitude of concern toward the leaf, although I may clearly discern that Change is the supreme law of nature and sadly realize that perishing is a fact I cannot escape; but when I notice an old villager, who is returning from his field, falling under the weight of a heavy sack of wheat he is carrying I rush to him and lift him up! Unlike the leaf, the villager is a human being, an intrinsically valuable being.

Now what does it mean to tolerate another human being, one who is different from me culturally, politically, or ideologically? It means, first, to allow her

to live, or act, according to her beliefs and values, that is, to refrain from interfering in her way of life or action. For example, a tolerant parent is one who allows her daughter to pursue a mode of behavior that may be different from her own or from the social or cultural norm; this implies that the parent does not interfere with her daughter. Second, "to tolerate" means "to recognize and respect." This second dimension of the meaning reveals the active, responsive character of toleration. A tolerant parent does not only allow her daughter to perform a certain action, but she responsively respects her right to do what she chooses to do. The parent does not merely refrain from interfering; she also supports her daughter in what she plans to do. She, moreover, recognizes her right to make her own choices. From a pedagogical point of view, she assists her in developing her character from within.

Toleration is essentially a moral concept, mainly because it entails the imperative to assume an active, caring attitude toward the different other as a human being. In the contemporary state, even in the most advanced democracies, most of the time toleration stops at the boundary of the law. The state cannot impose any type of moral rule or modes of behavior beyond the statement of the established law. But this is not the case in the religious community. Here the ground of toleration is not an established law but humanity and ultimately the Word of God. In this kind of community the members are related to each other as human beings, not merely as legal entities, before the eyes of God. Respect for the other, which entails caring for her, is not a matter of choice but of moral obligation. This is why in order for inter-religious dialogue to foster mutual understanding the interlocutors should be tolerant of the beliefs and values of each other. At the level of conceptual interchange one is tolerant when she recognizes what the other says, when she allows her to present and explicate her view, or interpretation, freely, and when she makes a serious effort to comprehend the truth disclosed in the course of the discourse. But the importance of toleration as a condition of dialogue is urgently needed at the level of *praxis*.

It is somewhat easy to change one's belief about a state of affairs in science or philosophy under the light of reason; but it is not easy to change one's attitude toward another human being, God, or the world, even when one discovers a new truth about any of these. Many a human being and many a society lives today by the truths of yesterday, not by the newly developed truths of today. And yet, especially among the younger generation, assuming a tolerant attitude is conducive to inter-religious dialogue, primarily because it is effective in penetrating, if not shattering, the barrier that segregates one religious community from another, and it is effective mainly because, in assuming it, we view the different other as a human being, from the standpoint of God. When we know, or recognize, the other as a human being, that she worships the same God, that her way of worship is simply different from ours, why should we refrain from understanding her religious way, not only by reading her religious book but also by interacting with her and seeing how she worships and shows her reverence to

the same God? This mode of existential dialogue promotes mutual understanding, yes, but it also deepens our appreciation of the mystery, wisdom, and divine creativity in the universe. The visit of the Anthropology class to the Barbourville Baptist Church, which I described earlier, should throw some light on the possibility of this kind of dialogue.

Third, Empathy. I emphasized earlier that a necessary condition for the possibility of inter-religious dialogue is that the interlocutors, whether at the level theory or praxis, should aim at the mutual understanding of the beliefs and values from the standpoint of the religious other—the way she understands and practices them. Now I shall zero in on the structure of the event, or process, of understanding itself: What does it take someone to understand her beliefs and values from her point of view? This question requests an explanation of how, for example, I can leave the point of view in terms of which I understand the transcendent being and things and events around me from my point of view and stand within another's point of view. More concretely, how can I understand the world the way she understands it? The point in spotlighting this question is not to abandon my religious point of view, or to become a convert, but to understand her understanding of the world or her point of view. Here two comments are in order. First, mutual understanding is not possible unless we assume the religious point of view of the other; second, we cannot assume an attitude of toleration, respect, and appreciation unless we understand the beliefs and values of the other from her religious point of view.

We usually think, analyze, evaluate, and make judgments in terms of the kind of beliefs, desires, emotions, level of intelligence, sense of value, and dispositions that make up the structure of our minds. The "I," or self, with which we identify ourselves, is inconceivable apart from this content. Accordingly it is *impossible* for my real self, ontologically speaking, to *enter the interior* of another self or to see what she sees or how she feels, thinks, or understands. But it is, I submit, possible for us to understand, and feel, *what it means for another human being to think, feel, or understand* something in a certain way. This requires a special act, or turn, of mind, in which the imagination can "think into" the mind of another person. This type of mental act is usually called "empathy," *einfuhlung—to "feel into."* This term, which was first used by Lutze and Fischer, comes from the Greek term *empatheia.* Most psychologists use it affectively, in the sense that we can feel what it is like for someone to feel sad, dejected, or happy, even though we do not feel or experience her feeling of sadness, dejection, or happiness. But in this context I use "empathy" in its *cognitive sense*, according to which we can understand what someone means when she says that she understands a certain state of affairs in a certain way. In this type of mental activity we "think into" the mind of the other person. I place my mind, by an "imaginative leap," so to say, into her mind and discern what *it is like* for her to believe in God, or how she understands some essential aspects of his nature, or

what she understands by the immortality of the soul, or how she conceives the universality of human nature. Although intellectual in character, cognitive empathy is not a purely conceptual act; it is also affective. It is, as Hegel and he phenomenologists after him have argued, a "feeling act": we do not, and cannot, only feel into the feeling of the other; we can also think into the belief of the other. By the way, the act of believing is affective, dynamic in character, because it involves an act of will—of perception, of grasp, of articulation, of assent, of assuming an attitude toward the object of belief. I cannot comprehend how, or what, a religious other understands a certain belief or value if I do not grasp this belief or value in the fullness of its being.

In inter-religious dialogue I do not stand, or converse, with a "stranger"; I stand and converse with a human being. In this encounter I do not merely seek to understand what she believes; I also seek to understand her in and through what she believes. The medium of this understanding is listening. By "listening" I do not simply mean hearting what she says. This is what frequently happens in social talk, classrooms, and business meetings. In these and similar situations ideas are spoken, they are received, and they are stored in some drawer of the human mind. It does not matter whether the ideas are understood, or misunderstood; what matters is that they are transmitted from one mind to another. Although this kind of communication takes place in inter-religious dialogue, and indeed it is indispensable to it, dialogue is richer and more complex in its structure and content. First, inter-religious dialogue is, as I have just stated, an act of will. The student *finds* herself in the classroom; people are *thrown into* social visits; and employees are *required* to attend meetings organized by their superiors; but participants in inter-religious dialogues *choose* to converse with the religiously different other. Second, their conversation is not a spontaneous but a deliberate encounter; its content and the way it proceeds revolve around a purpose. In fact, the conversation is structured around the purpose. This cannot happen if the interlocutors do not give the ideas being interchanged their full attention. Accordingly it is reasonable to say that inter-religious dialogue is an active, responsive, purposeful event. In it the interlocutors attend to each other as minds and as human beings. This last feature—"to attend"—brings into relief another aspect of inter-religious dialogue: *care*. As a listener I care for what the other says. I focus my attention on what is said from a feeling of interest, and I am interested in it because I deem it important. But how do I exercise this care? By making a special effort to comprehend the beliefs and values she is presenting and explicating in terms of their assumptions, structural elements, implications, and affective content—as living wholes. The words I hear in the conversation are carriers of meaning. My first task is to chart the territory of this meaning, to discern its levels, shades, and implicit and explicit associations, that is, to open up the door of the domain of meaning of the words I hear. This activity requires linguistic as well as theological or philosophical skill and knowledge. The meaning we comprehend when we read or hear a sentence is

not merely a kind of abstract reality that passively enter the mind; no, it is a creatively structured reality and as such a living content. Accordingly the act of comprehension, or understanding, regardless of whether it is achieved by means of reading or hearing a text, is essentially a dialogical event. It is a generally recognized fact that merely reading or hearing certain ideas do not necessarily entail understanding them. The mind has to receive the ideas, actively penetrate the domain of the meaning inherent in them, recognize it for what it is, and then embrace it in order for the act of understanding to take place; and we cannot say that they are "understood" until they are incorporated in the structure of the mind that understands them. As we can see, understanding takes place in the mind of the one who undertakes the act of understanding. This is exactly why this kind of understanding can be a moment of human growth and development, and this is why we can say it is a transformative activity, one in which we see, feel, and act in a new way, and this is why we can view the other in a new light—in the light of The Divine.

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