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IS INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE EVEN POSSIBLE? MEETING THE OTHER IN A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

<https://doi.org/10.12775/TiCz.2022.011>

Abstract. To become reality, religious freedom requires the possibility of inter-religious dialogue. Does dialogue lead to the abolition of differences between religions? Should dialogue lead to religious syncretism? This paper attempts to grasp the essence of interfaith dialogue on the basis of contemporary philosophy by presenting the notion of dialogical attitude, the adoption of which makes dialogue possible. Five necessary assumptions that constitute a dialogical attitude are characterized and must be accepted before meeting the Other. The idea of *tikkun olam* – the Jewish concept of repairing the world – is also presented briefly. Its recent reception, in the author's belief, has established the perfect atmosphere for treating religious dialogue as an important step in achieving peace and justice.

Keywords: dialogical attitude, de-monstra-tion, interfaith dialogue, religious pluralism, *tikkun olam*.

Streszczenie. Czy dialog międzyreligijny jest w ogóle możliwy? Spotkanie z Innym w ujęciu filozoficznym. Wolność religijna, aby móc się urzeczywistnić, wymaga możliwości podjęcia dialogu międzyreligijnego. Czy taki dialog zmierza do zniesienia różnic między religiami? Czy dialog powinien prowadzić do synkretyzmu? W artykule staram się uchwycić istotę dialogu międzyreligijnego w oparciu o współczesną filozofię, prezentując koncepcję nastawienia dialogicznego, które to nastawienie stanowi warunek możliwości samego dialogu. Opisuję pięć koniecznych założeń, składających się na nastawienie dialogiczne, które muszą zostać przyjęte przed spotkaniem z Innym. Przedsta-

wiam również krótko ideę tikkun olam – żydowską koncepcję naprawy świata. Jej współczesna recepcja stworzyła idealną atmosferę dla traktowania dialogu międzyreligijnego jako ważnego kroku w dążeniu do pokoju i sprawiedliwości.

Słowa kluczowe: nastawienie dialogiczne, de-monstra-cja, dialog międzyreligijny, pluralizm religijny, tikkun olam.

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to imagine a better space for the expression of religious freedom than the universe of interreligious dialogue. Freedom is the very foundation on which the dialogue can be laid, as it is based on recognising the freedom of any person to practise a religion other than one's own, allowing them to fully embrace the living tradition of the religion. However, if someone wants to engage in a dialogue and does not simultaneously adopt a particular attitude, which will be referred to here as a *d i a l o g i c a l a t t i t u d e*, there is no opportunity for the freedom to actualise, and subsequently, the dialogue becomes utterly impossible. And so, in this brief introduction, I have already implied the answer to the question asked in the title – interreligious dialogue is possible, but only if we adopt the dialogical attitude. What is this dialogical attitude, then? When referring to the term 'attitude', it should be emphasised that, in contrast to the phenomenological attitude, it cannot be characterised by being presuppositionless. It is a set of conditions which should be assumed by participants of the dialogue long before they engage in it. If we do not accept these conditions, the dialogue will never happen. It must be emphasised that this paper is concerned solely with these assumptions a subject should adopt before entering into the dialogue. It is not a purpose of the text to analyse the notion of dialogue or religion from the perspective of a particular denomination, nor does it go into the issues of Christian theology. This paper aims to present the conditions of the possibility of the dialogue, in large part in the light of certain issues of philosophy of dialogue – it states that these conditions constitute a dialogical attitude that the ethical subject must adopt when entering into the dialogue. Hence let us take a closer look at the conditions that make this dialogue possible.

1.

To begin, let me focus on the very first element of the term ‘inter-religious dialogue’, namely, religions. We shall not define or enumerate religions at this point¹ but briefly describe the general relations between religions, encapsulating them in the three paradigms of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Our attitude towards other religions is the first issue we have to cope with (which is perhaps the most difficult for the majority of people) and answer the question of what the paradigm through which we are perceiving others is.

When we say that a given religion is exclusivist, we mean that it claims the exclusive right to being truthful, and when the problem of salvation is considered, then following that religion is the only way to attain it. Therefore, other religions are deprived of the truth, and their followers will not be saved. Inclusivist religious communities will also be convinced about the truth inherent in their religion, but they recognise the elements of truth in other religions as well. One does not necessarily have to be a follower of a given religion to be saved (in light of this religion), as it expands the community of the saved ones to all humankind. However, it remains the point of reference for this salvation. Meanwhile, pluralism claims that all religions are equal, and salvation can be attained on equal terms.² Pluralism can be explained by means of a popular formula, according to which, God is too great to limit Himself solely to one way of worship, similarly to what John Hick states: ‘Each is conscious that Transcendent Being is infinitely greater than his own limited vision of it.’³ This does not mean that the differences between religions are becoming blurred. Pluralism emphasises the coexistence of religions in all their diversity; however, it does not interpret the role of any of those religions as more important or exceptional.

¹ Defining the term ‘religion’ is out of the scope of this text, for the paper focuses on the specific attitude one person adopts towards the Other without distinguishing which particular religion another person confesses.

² Cf. Nathan L. King, ‘Religious Diversity and Its Challenges to Religious Belief,’ *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 4 (2008): 825–832; Zbigniew Kubacki, *Wprowadzenie do teologii religii* (Warsaw: Rhetos, 2018).

³ John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 81.

There is no doubt that it is fundamental to reject exclusivism in the interreligious dialogue. It is hard to imagine that we can maintain the dialogue if we consider others idolaters or heretics and conversations with them an opportunity for proselytism, rather than meeting them on equal terms. Inclusivism can be a good point of departure, as it acknowledges the existence of a religious truth, outside of the religion one actively follows. Still, since it assigns the superior position to one particular religion, again, it is hard to consider the possibility of two different religions meeting on equal terms. The thesis that, for example, all men can be saved by God's grace, given through Jesus Christ,⁴ implies that in this sense we are all Christians in some way, which may provoke a justified objection from religions other than Christianity. Therefore, pluralism is the only paradigm that does not initially favour any religion, either from the angle of truthfulness or from salvation efficacy. When looking at another religion from the pluralist perspective, we do not condescend or condemn it, but we stand hand in hand with it, on equal terms. Religious pluralism, being an expression of our attitude towards other religions, is a prerequisite we must assume before we engage in dialogue.

2.

However, the dialogue is not held between religions themselves, but between human beings. When encountering the problem of pluralism, we, as scholars, can and should suspend our own beliefs and, instead, look at religions from an objective perspective, without prejudgements, and compare them freely, searching for common elements and attempting to demythologise some elements inherent to religion. But, such a scholarly attitude will not make us dialogists, nor is it in any way related to the dialogical attitude. As Stanisław Krajewski notices, 'interfaith dialogue

⁴ The find more about the inclusivist thesis of uniqueness and salvific universality of mystery of Christ, see: Jan Perszon, 'Jedyność i powszechność zbawcza Jezusa Chrystusa w kontekście religii pozachrześcijańskich,' in *Teologia religii. Chrześcijański punkt widzenia*, ed. Grzegorz Dziewulski (Łódź–Kraków: Dehon, 2007), 115–137; Ireneusz S. Ledwoń, 'Pluralistyczna teologia religii,' *ibidem*, 35–54.

is a dialogue of people representing religious traditions.⁵ Bearing this in mind, we need to be ingrained deeply within the tradition. This tradition must constitute a fundamental part of our lives. We should know it well and identify with it, and, importantly, we should be perceived as such by our partners in the dialogue. Faithfulness to the tradition becomes the source of our identity, which is perfectly expressed by Paul Ricoeur: ‘recognising oneself *in*’ means we identify with the values or ideals of a community, which contributes to ‘recognising oneself *by*’ – others identify us by these traits. The necessity to remain faithful becomes an element of maintaining one’s self, because, by means of the created dispositions, evaluative in a way, a human being identifies her or himself.⁶ Fidelity to tradition makes us reliable partners. At the same time, it secures us from the danger of syncretism, which is the opposite of dialogue, and to which it cannot lead. If someone started representing another religion during the dialogue, it would definitely be proof of their deep identity crisis.⁷ Of course, all this time, we have been referring to the living tradition, which is not opposed to interpretation or some modification, and which does not stand for the collection of all that was established in the past. ‘The interfaith dialogue’, says Krajewski, ‘is all about having a connection with a specific tradition for a purpose, and an assumption that one remains within its frames even when we are ready for some innovative interpretations.’⁸ A similar conviction can be found in Abraham J. Heschel’s work:

The [...] prerequisite of interfaith is faith. It is only out of the depth of involvement in the unending drama that began with Abraham that we can help one another toward an understanding of our situation. Interfaith must come out of depth, not out of a void absence of faith. It is not an enterprise for those who are half learned or spiritually immature [...]. Syncretism is a perpetual possibility. Moreover, at a time of paucity of faith, interfaith may become a substitute for faith, suppressing authenticity for

⁵ Stanisław Krajewski, ‘Ku filozofii dialogu międzyreligijnego: między kim odbywa się dialog?’ in *Filozofia Dialogu* vol. 5, ed. Józef Baniak (Poznań: Adam Mickiewicz University Press, 2007), 96.

⁶ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 121.

⁷ Cf. Krajewski, ‘Ku filozofii,’ 97.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

the sake of compromise. In a world of conformity, religions can easily be levelled down to the lowest common denominator.⁹

Thus, following pluralism, which in a dialogical attitude does not allow the colonisation of other religions, we need to dive into inclusivism, namely, return freely to the perspective of one's own religious tradition. Inclusivism will be referred to here as the initial rooting in the tradition because, as the participants of the dialogue, we cannot suspend our identity or reflect on it from a distance. Hence, we entirely privilege our own tradition. When meeting the Other, we will always hold the perspective of our own religion in the hope of fusing our horizons, but without hoping for complete objectivism.

3.

When we have accepted the fact that numerous religions exist and in each of them there is an element of truth, and if we assume that we always speak from within our tradition, it is high time we took a look at our interlocutor, who has been moulded by these assumptions. She or he is the Other – coming from a different tradition, from a different religion. For that reason, this Otherness is not neutral. It is the Foreignness, the Strangeness, the Alieness, which poses a potential threat to our specific character and identity. Without dialogue, the Other will remain foreign. What we must endeavour for is a demonstration. The dialogue is a process of demonstrating.

This notion has a twofold, xenological meaning. First of all, we are demonstrating ourselves to the Other, which means that we are introducing ourselves to her or him, describing ourselves and allowing ourselves to become understandable. At the same time, this act denotes demonstration of the Other, in which the prefix 'de-' is used to add the meaning 'remove' or 'reduce', and the Latin word 'monstra', whose singular form is 'monstrum', means a thing that evokes fear and wonder, namely, monsters wreaking havoc, frequently perceived as the enemies of gods.

⁹ Abraham J. Heschel, 'No Religion is an Island,' *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 21, no. 2 (1966): 123–124.

Demonstration is, thus, an act of demonstrification of the other party of the dialogue. As a result of *d e - m o n s t r a - t i o n*, the unerasable distance between oneself and the Other is diminished to a minimum. It changes into proximity. What used to be foreign resembles the familiar. No longer is the Other considered a monster of which we should be afraid, or an enemy.

But, Otherness is not erased in the act of demonstration. Otherness should be maintained and celebrated, because, as for Emmanuel Levinas,¹⁰ it is the foundation on which our ethical behaviours are built. What is erased in the dialogue is foreignness, but closeness or proximity forces us to restrict ourselves in our freedom. It compels us to move from our space in order to make space for the other. It finds its expression in simple, but important, empirical actions, e.g. when I, as a Christian, stop pronouncing the name of God contained in the Tetragrammaton for the sake of Jews. Restriction of our freedom is the price we must pay for demonstration. We must assume in the dialogical attitude the willingness for some limitations of freedom.

4.

Closeness always calls for a reaction, for taking responsibility for what is close to us. The dialogue in which two parties are familiarised with one another belongs to the sphere of interpersonal communication which

¹⁰ 'Time, language and subjectivity delineate a pluralism and consequently, in the strongest sense of this term, an experience: one being's reception of an absolutely other being. In the place of ontology [...] is substituted as primordial the relation of a being to a being, which is none the less not equivalent to a rapport between subject and object, but rather to a proximity, to a relation with the Other.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 293; 'Transcendence designates a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance, as would happen with relations within the same; this relation does not become an implantation in the other and a confusion with him, does not affect the very identity of the same, its ipseity, does not silence the apology, does not become apostasy and ecstasy.' Idem, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007), 42.

Levinas¹¹ calls *Le Dit*, the Said. It is nothing else but a verbalised expression of dialogue in language, a discussion and an exchange of views. Such a dialogue is a long-lasting process. However, there is another aspect to this communication, which Levinas calls *Le Dire*, the Saying. The Saying does not rely on words. It is a pre-predicative language. It is not a process, but an event. It is the initial meeting with the Other – experienced only as quick as a flash, but very eventful. This event, which is often referred to as a deep dialogue, makes us commit ethically to take responsibility for the Other. The Other addresses their wordless words to us, the subjects: ‘Thou shalt not kill!’ It is the imperative which forces us to have an ethical response with our whole lives. The deep dialogue is a space in which discursive dialogue occurs. The assumption that each dialogue is built on deep dialogue, which is our commitment to taking responsibility for another human being, is the essential element of dialogical attitude.

5.

How can we be sure, however, that a desire of substitution is not concealed under the pretence of closeness? How certain can we be that another party in the dialogue made the same commitments as we did? This problem is illustrated in a short story from *Tales of the Hasidim* by Martin Buber: ‘Rabbi Abraham was asked: «Our sages say: “And there is not a thing that has not its place.” And so man too has his own place. Then why do people sometimes feel so crowded?» He replied: «Because each wants to occupy the place of the other».’¹² This short exchange exemplifies the utter personal fiasco, which everyone willing to enter the winding paths of interfaith dialogue is doomed to experience without having eradicated oneself from proselytism and the totalising perspective of the exclusive truth. It is a failure of dialogue. Confronting the Other in the dialogical attitude, we reduce the risk of violence, the willingness to destroy the Other (‘Thou shalt not kill!’) and substituting another’s religion with ours.

¹¹ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Inaczej niż być lub ponad istotą*, trans. Piotr Mrówczyński (Warsaw: Aletheia, 2000), 66–71.

¹² Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 72.

The only assumption that we expect to be willingly accepted both by us and the other party in the dialogue, the only presumption we would like to impose on the Other, is reciprocity. If one party is eager to impose their arguments, then it is no longer a dialogue. This expectation of reciprocity shall be referred to using Krajewski's term 'meta-expectation', as 'it does not relate in any way to the subject of the meeting itself, in this case religious matters, but only to the very problem of what kind of a meeting it is supposed to be.'¹³ For Krajewski, this meta-expectation occurs solely in the case of deep dialogue because it is only in such conditions that a complete affirmation of a partner's religiosity is possible, without imposing any limitations on their freedom. However, because the deep dialogue is being treated as an originating event, being the very foundation of dialogue in general, I consider meta-expectation as one of the key assumptions of the dialogical attitude. Without reciprocity, we will be like a sheep completely surrounded by wolves. It is only a matter of time until we are devoured or – what is even worse – we desire to turn into wolves ourselves. Meta-expectation is the only guarantee that the ethical commitment we show towards the Other is also shown towards us. Meta-expectation is the hope for justice.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND THE KERYGMA OF TIKKUN OLAM

It can be seen then that the dialogical attitude is a collection of assumptions which prove our readiness to engage in dialogue. Having the dialogical attitude, we are calling: *H i n e n i!* – Here I am! – letting the Other know that no violence will be inflicted on them because we, as ethical subjects:

- are assuming religious pluralism, and due to this, we surrender the intention to convert the Other;
- are identifying with our own religious tradition, thanks to which we lift the threat of syncretism, simultaneously being self-critical of this very tradition;

¹³ Krajewski, *Ku filozofii*, 102.

- are willing to restrict our own freedom so that the Other can approach us;
- are assuming that the dialogue is an expression of our obligation to take responsibility for the Other;
- are expecting the Other to respond with the same assumptions.

The dialogical attitude which turns into action is a process of perpetual learning and improvement of both oneself as an individual and the community in which one lives. It is realised through activities for the sake of peace and justice; it intends to *demonstrate* Otherness, to erase hostility and suffering, and as such, the dialogical attitude is the expression of *tikkun olam*.

Tikkun olam (repairing, mending, healing the world, improving society) is a Hebrew term, a Jewish notion, very famous nowadays in the United States, which denotes multiple forms of social activism: from justifying legal solutions to struggling for social justice, environmental responsibility or economic opportunity, albeit the history of this concept is long¹⁴ and has its origins in Mishnah within the context of improvement of legal norms solely inside Jewish society. But, the meaning of the concept has changed through the ages from particularistic to universalistic. This was due especially to Lurianic Kabbalah, in which *tikkun olam* describes the everlasting repair of the world as a messianic endeavour, in which every single person should take part, not only Jews. It presents every person as a partner of God in this process of world restoration and striving for peace. This may explain the great attractiveness of the concept for people of today, tired of constant war and suffering, especially after the tragedy of Shoah. Although the idea of *tikkun olam* is still a bone of contention between Reform and Orthodox Judaism (which is reflected in numerous discussions about the meaning of the phrase, especially the origins of the term), it should be emphasised that, for Reform Judaism, interreligious dialogue is an important element of a fight for peace and justice. In *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*, adopted at the 1999

¹⁴ Cf. Gilbert S. Rosenthal, 'Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept,' *The Journal of Religion* 85, no. 2 (2005): 214–240; Levi Cooper, 'The Assimilation of Tikkun Olam,' *Jewish Political Studies Review* 25, No. 3–4 (2013): 10–42; Byron L. Sherwin, 'Tikkun Olam: A Case of Semantic Displacement,' *Jewish Political Studies Review* 25, no. 3–4 (2014): 43–58.

Pittsburgh Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, we can read:

We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfil the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God's creation. Partners with God in tikkun olam, repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom and justice to our world.¹⁵

Tikkun olam, along with interfaith dialogue, becomes a commandment which every person should fulfil. It is no longer a sign of our goodwill, but it is our moral duty. It is my hope that none of us wishes to evade this responsibility.

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¹⁵ 'A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism,' 1999 Pittsburgh Convention Central Conference of American Rabbis, accessed June 2, 2020, www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-statement-principles-reform-judaism/.

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