

Words to the rookies: Speaking well in interreligious dialogue

Author: Bede Bidlack

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Chestnut Hill, Mass.: Theology Dept., Boston College, 2009

Words to the Rookies: Speaking Well in Interreligious Dialogue

By Bede Bidlack

Engaging Particularities VII¹

Boston College, Boston, MA, March 27, 2009

¹ Engaging Particularities is a graduate student conference. The audience is primarily Catholic, theology students interested in interreligious dialogue.

Preface

My presentation begins with a story told by Philip Cunningham, who works in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Ironically, it takes place at a conference celebrating the fortieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. The irony will become apparent in a moment:

To a group of Jews and Catholics, most of whom had been involved in dialogue for years, Cardinal Avery Dulles read a paper titled, “Catholic Views on the Jewish Covenant.” He declared: “The Second Vatican Council, while providing a solid and traditional framework for discussing Jewish-Christian relations, did not attempt to answer all questions. In particular, *it left open the question whether the Old Covenant remains in force today*” [italics added].

As they heard these words, I saw the life drain from the faces of the Jews who were present. Some of them no doubt saw a fundamental basis for any kind of relationship, let alone dialogue, being called into question: Catholic respect for the integrity and legitimacy of Jewish covenantal life. Some of these Jewish listeners had been pioneers in the dialogue for decades and had been criticized by some of their co-religionists for being so naïve as to think that affirmative Catholic statements were anything more than temporary aberrations—triggered by guilt for the Shoah—from standard Christian attitudes. Some of them, being Orthodox Jews, may have ruefully recalled the influential opinion of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik that Jews could not engage in theological dialogue with Christians because there could never be a level playing field between the two traditions. Now the words of an influential cardinal-theologian were putting the bases for all their labors into doubt. Their alarm and hurt was painful to behold. It was made even more so by being totally unnecessary.

Also painful to witness was the apparent lack of concern by Cardinal Dulles for how his words might be heard by his listeners. While this event was not a “dialogue” in any meaningful sense, but consisted of serial monologues, it seemed to me that the interreligious nature of the gathering demanded a minimal level of sensitivity to the perceptions of the religious “other.” The topic that Dulles raised about how Jewish and Christian covenantal lives interrelate was certainly a worthy one, but could and should have been expressed in ways that did not seem to invalidate the post-Christum Jewish tradition. Because of the nature of Dulles’ replies, the question and answer period that followed was predominantly people talking past each other. My subjective impression was that Cardinal Dulles was determined to assert “truth” heedless of its impact on the people being discussed. The episode still seems to me to be a model of how not to engage in interreligious interaction.²

² Philip A. Cunningham, personal communication, October 14, 2008.

By listening to this story, each of us individually—in his or her own mind—and collectively were sitting with those Jews and Christians and heard the words of Cardinal Dulles. As we imagined the “life drain from the faces of the Jews” we shared with Dr. Cunningham the pain of a relationship put at risk. We are left with a powerful image of the consequences of speaking poorly in dialogue because of a story.

Introduction

Stories inform, motivate, inspire, and shape behavior. Through our imagination, they allow us to traverse time and space, to be two places at once, and to have an experience that is both solitary and shared.

Stories fall under the virtue of speaking well. Speaking well along with listening well are two virtues that must be cultivated in any dialogue, and certainly in interreligious dialogue.³

My purpose here is two fold. First, I explore part of this virtue of speaking well. I suggest that perhaps the best way to demonstrate an argument is to persuade by simply using a story. Perhaps the best way to motivate your religious communities to engage in dialogue and to learn about other traditions is to collect, remember, and to tell *your* stories of *your* experiences with interreligious dialogue. But we young scholars—we rookies, as they say in the world of sports—do not have many stories, yet. So my second purpose is to turn to those who have gone before us for their stories and their advice from the field.

³ Bradford E. Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum Press, 2006) 253-254.

Method

I interviewed our elders in interreligious dialogue to get stories and advice that was more personal, than what they wrote in their more formal books and articles. And—because most of us are Catholic theologians wishing to serve the Church through interreligious dialogue—I wanted to ask specifically Catholic theologians who work in dialogue with other traditions. You have already met Philip A. Cunningham in the opening story. He is the Director of the Jewish-Catholic Institute at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia. He shared from his decades of Christian-Jewish encounters. Since much of the discussion around interreligious dialogue is built upon our understanding of the Church and other religions, I asked Gavin D’Costa, Professor of Catholic Theology at the University of Bristol to comment on interreligious dialogue from his specialty, theology of religions. James Wiseman is a Benedictine monk and a professor in the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America. Fr. James has had his most fruitful encounters with Buddhists. First recognized for his contributions to the study of Hinduism, the Jesuit, Francis X. Clooney shared with us his interactions with Hindus. Finally, Eileen Eppig is a Sister of Notre Dame and associate professor of religious studies at the College of Notre Dame in Baltimore, and related her experiences with Muslim interlocutors.⁴

Stories

Why did I trouble these scholars with an interview? Why didn’t I simply read their publications? Why did I want to hear their stories?

Before we could read, we heard stories that shaped our moral world from the vice of lying of “The Little Boy who Cried Wolf” to the virtue of determination of “The Little Engine that

⁴ See Appendix for the interview questionnaire I sent to them.

Could.” Bible stories shape us more powerfully because they are relived through the liturgy, and Jesus, of course, was a master storyteller.

But somewhere in our education, we were told to leave stories to our childhood. Stories are too dubious, and only fact was considered to reveal truth. Reason and analysis are the midwives that allow fact to give birth to truth. Yet, for most of history, truth shaped human lives without needing facts. While this gave a lot of room for truth to express itself, it equally opened the door to distortion, oppression, and manipulation.

In response, the sciences discouraged stories in presenting the fruits of analysis. Analysis should be objective, demonstrative, and replicable. Any engagement with the imagination should be subtle, conceptual, and abstract. The scientific study of religion treats religion and its followers as objects for study. The scientist states a hypothesis and the data provided by the object of study either support the hypothesis or not.

Without question, the scientific method has advanced our knowledge in nearly every human endeavor, including religion. My concern, however, lies with the tendency for some writers to turn their objective lens on their audience. They de-humanize the audience, such that readers or listeners are expected to think like a computer with a built-in dictionary and thesaurus, and not like a human being. These writers use pretentious words and long sentences because of the fear that other scholars will think them dull or their ideas obtuse and not worth attending to. Or perhaps they use highfalutin words because they really do not know what they are trying to say, so they hide behind their diction. I have read this in journal articles and heard it in conference papers. I am sure you have, too. This kind of writing is condescending, defensive, and obscure. The rhetorical problem is that this writing does not inform, persuade, or motivate. And doesn't that miss the point of writing?

In contrast, at the Boston College Symposium on Interreligious Dialogue last fall, Mark Unno, a Buddhist priest and scholar, gave a paper that was largely a collection of stories. One story, his retelling of Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream, had him imitating a butterfly. This is not what one usually expects of a paper presentation. At lunch I had to ask him about it. He said that he would not have given such a presentation at a religious studies conference, but that a theology conference allows people to relax a little and be themselves.

In this statement, Dr. Unno reveals an understood difference between religious studies and theology. On the one hand, the humanistic study of religion is the product of Enlightenment science. The scholar is to be objective and not appear in her work. Theology, on the other hand, allows the theologian to admit that she is involved in her study. She has a relationship with Ultimate Reality and is beholden to It—whether It is the God of the theistic religions or the Emptiness of Nirvana.

If Dr. Unno is right, then let us not hide behind our language in an effort to sound learned. Instead, let us write and speak plainly in a way that reveals our ideas, and admits that we are thinking them. I maintain that straightforward, unambiguous prose is not dumbing down your argument. On the contrary, clear writing as intelligent vernacular⁵ can more powerfully motivate and inform, especially if it includes a story now and again.

Stories interest me because they speak of cultivating the virtue of speaking well in dialogue. Along with listening well, speaking well is a multidimensional virtue. In dialogue, it means striking a balance between reticence and vanity, intuiting the right time to speak, speaking what is correct and true, and utilizing the right style, the right voice to speak from.⁶ According to Dr. Cunningham, Cardinal Dulles speaks poorly in the opening story, because he addressed his words at the wrong time and to the wrong audience. However, by seeking to incorporate stories

⁵ Mark Tredinnick, *Writing Well: The Essential Guide* (New York/Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 17.

⁶ Cf. Hinze.

and first hand advice from our seniors in interreligious dialogue, I am primarily addressing the last point—right style.

In my interviews with them, three themes stood out most boldly: 1) the question of who comes to the table in dialogue 2) challenges and advice to us young scholars 3) and the importance of hope. What follows will bring life and faces to the many ideas we read and write about with regards to interreligious dialogue.

Who Comes to the Table

Who we invite for dialogue translates into: With whom do we think we can fruitfully dialogue? The Church has shown an openness to dialogue with nearly any tradition that considers itself to be a religion. The Church has had conversations not only with the Abrahamic faiths, Buddhism, and Hinduism, but also Shinto and indigenous religions of Africa.⁷ However, not all traditions want to dialogue with the Church, and not all members of all traditions want to come to the table, as this story from Dr. D’Costa illustrates:

When I started working with two Buddhists and suggested that we could do something on interfaith dialogue for our students. Both said: No, they were not interested as they had no interest in Christianity or interfaith dialogue. I was shocked. It taught me not to make assumptions about people or their interests. Since then, they have become close friends and we talk about these issues. It also taught me that relationships are vital and prior to the artificiality of 'inter-faith dialogue'.⁸

In *Dialogue and Proclamation*, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples listed as one of the obstacles to dialogue to be a lack of *value* of interreligious dialogue.⁹ Disinterest cannot only be on the part of peoples of other traditions, as in D’Costa’s case, but also among those with whom we live. The latter can be

⁷ Hinze, 225.

⁸ Gavin D’Costa e-mail communication September 26, 2008 D’Costa notes this incident as both his most painful memory and his most beautiful one.

⁹ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation* May 19, 1991, cited 1-28-09. Available from

more embarrassing than the former. Fr. Wiseman tells the story which involves a Muslim scholar, not his usual Buddhist partners:

As a longtime member of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, I have tried...to organize dialogues on the local level... On one occasion, perhaps fifteen years ago, I arranged for Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr of George Washington University to come to (St. Anselm's Abbey), where I reside, one Saturday morning to make a presentation on Islam and participate in dialogue following his talk. Professor Nasr is a world-class scholar, generally recognized as our country's most reliable interpreter of the Sufi tradition...He has given the Gifford Lectures in Scotland, has written many books, and is in constant demand as a lecturer. I invited Benedictine and Cistercian monks and sisters from various monasteries in the mid-Atlantic region...No one at all came from the other monasteries...It was embarrassing to find that Professor Nasr and the few of his own students that he brought with him actually outnumbered the Christian monks present from my own community...¹⁰

A lack of interest in dialogue can be attributed to adherents of a tradition, who are happy with a rich relationship solely with their own tradition. The borders are distant, unattractive, or even threatening. Another reason may be a lack of commitment to the hard work of dialogue. Fr. Clooney finds the lack of commitment to the dialogue itself or the hard work of learning more about one's own tradition or the tradition of the other to be extremely frustrating. D'Costa echoes Clooney when he advises us to "get serious about the intellectual rigor required from (your) own and (others') traditions."¹¹

Challenges to the Rookies

Indeed, when we enter into dialogue, we need to have a clear goal in mind. In various documents, the Church has stated that its approach to interreligious dialogue is part of the larger evangelizing mission of the Church. In *Dialogue and Proclamation*, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, defines "evangelizing mission" broadly as: "the mission of the Church

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html. Section 52.

¹⁰

James A. Wiseman, OSB, personal communication, September 27, 2008.

¹¹

D'Costa, personal communication, September 26, 2008.

in its totality.”¹² In other words, the Church’s interest is the salvation of the world, not the conversion of adherents from other traditions.¹³ Within this broad framework, approaches will vary. The question of the place of the tools for dialogue—the head and the heart—was the most distinguishing mark between my informants.

All would agree that knowledge of Christian theology and a rich knowledge of the tradition of one’s dialogue partner are very important. For Clooney, the practice of comparative theology is itself interreligious dialogue. He notes in his communications with me, in his conference presentations, and his many publications on comparative theology that the work of comparative theology transforms the theologian. A deep interaction with another tradition changes how one lives and grows within one’s own faith. And isn’t that what happens in interreligious dialogue? After study, one can then approach dialogue enriched by that experience, and thereby be a better dialogue partner. Dialogue itself, Clooney notes, is:

a practical exercise and experience, and while it can be studied and theorized, it should not be the primary subject of study by a young scholar. (Instead) go deeper into (your) own tradition and into another tradition – create and deepen a life-long internal dialogue.¹⁴

D’Costa likewise dissuades us from working too hard on what exactly dialogue is or the best way to approach it. When I asked him what he would warn us against, part of his response was: “The rot of theorizing endlessly about dialogue and not actually getting to know the tradition out of which (you) live—and one other tradition.”¹⁵

By contrast, Fr. Wiseman, perhaps due to his contemplative, Benedictine formation, views intellectual discourse as secondary to what another monk, Wayne Teasdale, calls the “Dialogue

¹² *Dialogue and Proclamation*, section 8.

¹³ Wayne Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations Across Traditions*, *Sheed & Ward Catholic Studies Series* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 68.

¹⁴ Francis X. Clooney, SJ, personal communication November 23, 2008.

¹⁵ D’Costa personal communication September 26, 2008.

of the Heart.”¹⁶ Indeed monastics have been leaders in interreligious dialogue. One need only think of Henri LeSaux, better known as Abhishiktananda, Bede Griffiths, Thomas Merton, or Charles de Foucauld. Himself a well respected theologian, Fr. Wiseman does not deny the importance of study and engagement with the difficulties of translating categories and ideas across traditions. He writes:

From all my years engaged in this endeavor, I think that I have come to grasp more and more the truth...that the key to success in any dialogue is not erudition but genuine speaking from the heart. By this I do not at all mean to downplay the importance of a solid knowledge of one’s own tradition and, as far as possible, the tradition of one’s dialogue partner, but to remain on the purely intellectual level would reduce dialogue to a merely academic exercise. I have also found that it is enriching when members of both groups meditate together and participate in joint rituals...All too often people think dialogue is limited to theological discussion, but “the dialogue of spiritual experience” is at least as important...¹⁷

Hope

The contemplative dialogue of the heart proposed by Wiseman resulted in a beautiful story at one of the monastic Gethsemani Encounters at the monastery where Thomas Merton did so much of his thinking and writing—Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey in Louisville, Kentucky. These meetings have been between Christian and Buddhist monastics from all over the world, including the Dalai Lama and Maha Ghosananda, the patriarch of Cambodian Buddhists. Fr. Wiseman writes the story at the first of these meetings in 1996:

Almost at once a deep level of trust was evident, so that all who spoke did so very openly, at times readily admitting ways in which they had failed in living up to the highest ideals of their tradition. There were some very moving exchanges...I still remember sitting next to a Zen *sensei* from Japan one evening during the proceedings and thinking that whatever the Buddhists mean by nirvana, it must be something similar to what I was experiencing during those days.¹⁸

¹⁶ Teasdale, 28-29, 72.

¹⁷ Wiseman personal communication, September 27, 2008.

¹⁸ Wiseman personal communication, September 27, 2008.

Although my informants disagree somewhat with regard to the place of the head and the heart in dialogue, they all have stories like this that give one a sense of hope for our work in interreligious relations. Noticeably Clooney, Cunningham, and Eppig all report their “most beautiful experience”¹⁹ occurred while they were not the hosts of an encounter, but the guests. In a final story, Dr. Eppig tells of breaking the fast at the end of the day during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan:

This past Ramadan, Aziza invited me (a Catholic nun) and two others in our dialogue (who are Muslim) to her house to end the fast one evening... We had shared in two dialogues and I had given a talk to the women at her mosque, but this went beyond official dialogue to friendship. To me this meant that our dialogue had borne fruit in real meaningful relationship... It was a very fulfilling moment.²⁰

Conclusion

These few stories pale in comparison to the widely advertised stories of dissension, conflict, and violence the media seem to celebrate. Indeed, we must never forget that our endeavor as ambassadors for our Church to other traditions is a new one, at least as far as it is understood today. The past would rather point us towards antimony or indifference, and the future to uncertainty. There are the serious divisions that block our way that entangle religious dialogue, such as racism and politics. But our faith is one of hope, so I wish to end with stories of hope. For that is one of the critical functions of stories—to give hope, to provide an image of the peace, cooperation, and love that we are working for, indeed, that Christ demands of us, especially in our roles as theologians. Even in our more academic writing we should dare to include such stories for the sake of our human audience, of persuasive argument, and of cultivating the virtue of speaking well. For if we cannot imagine fruitful dialogue, it will never come to be.

¹⁹ See appendix.

²⁰ Eileen Eppig, SND, personal communication November 30, 2008.

Appendix

Interview Questions Sent to Participants

1. What is your most painful memory of dialogue?
2. What is your most beautiful memory?
3. What incident changed how you think about dialogue and theology of religions?
4. What is your hope for future dialogue?
5. What mistake do you see many young scholars make in their approach to dialogue? What do you warn us against?