



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 25, 2021

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



9 772668 779000

Interreligious dialogue: Identity versus openness

Petrov George Daniel¹, Pleșa Victor Marius²

¹²Theology Faculty, Ovidius University – Constanța, România

petrovgeorgedaniel@gmail.com¹, victorplesa24@yahoo.com²

Abstract. Interreligious dialogue is constantly proving its importance, especially in today's society, where we find a multitude of religious offers, all claiming to be keepers or discoverers of the supreme truth. This does not mean a negotiation of the faith of each participant in the interreligious dialogue, but a knowledge of the other and his creed. The need for interreligious dialogue results from the pluralism of religions that society has in its composition, religions that are either revealed, as Christianity is, or that talk about impersonal powers man should aspire to through various forms of meditation. That is why it is imperative that Christian religions express their soteriological doctrine, from which ensues the most important relationship that can be achieved between God and man.

Keywords. interreligious dialogue, identity, openness, soteriology

Introduction

There is a category of theologians whose theological research is defined as exclusivist, in the sense that it never sketches a relationship in relation to ecumenical or even local interreligious dialogues. Those alike do not seek participation, and implicitly, do not seek solutions to current religious or even social problems, but are limited to their own exclusivist vision about the truth.

This category of theologians understands religious pluralism as "a global manifestation of the flawed response of sinful humanity to general revelation."¹ They also consider that a pluralistic approach to theology does not offer, in any way, an enrichment of a spiritual nature. Hence the natural rejection of any attempt of interreligious dialogue. However, the analysis of the writings resulting from the research of this category of theologians, denotes the need for a form of interreligious dialogue, so that the results of their research be known by those of other religions². Understanding this need is in turn limited by the guidelines that interreligious dialogue should follow.

I. The emphasis of identity in fundamentalist theology, a ground for exclusivism

A distinction should be made between exclusive theologians, whose specialization is missiological theology, and fundamentalist theologies. The first category is supporting dialogue, but without reaching adoptable conclusions, as their often draw their conclusions by

¹ B.A. Demarest, *General and Special Revelation: Epistemological Foundations of Religious Pluralism*, in A.D. Clarke and B.B. Winter (eds). *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, Paternoster Press, 1992, p. 206.

² C. Muck, *Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue*, in *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 (1993), p. 517.

simply rejecting other theological views. The simple analysis of soteriological exclusivism shows an inclination for dialogue, for understanding each other, hence the missionary effect of increasing the congregation³.

The relationship between missiology and soteriological exclusivism is characterized by indissolubility, although sometimes it leads to fundamentalism. In situations where fundamentalists can be defined as exclusivists, it turns out that "they reject the possibility of truth outside their own tradition. Fundamentalist groups are not necessarily motivated by an effort to convert and therefore to save those outside their community. Instead, they seek to demarcate and defend an absolute truth that offers a sense of identity and must be protected from any compromise. For the fundamentalist, the main target of proselytism is often not the other, but the lax member of one's own religious community."⁴

The main danger that results from a fundamentalist doctrine is that the latter has an isolated feature and cannot accept the idea of an interreligious dialogue. The consequence is the actual rejection of any other theological opinion, leading to an withdrawal, a fact that obviously contradicts the pluralism of today's society.

Although the exclusivists are very reluctant to actually participate in interreligious dialogues, missiologists still accept such participation, in contrast with dogmatists. Through this participation, the universe of knowing the other is opened and the opportunity to experience and express solidarity towards those who share other opinions and religious experiences comes as a result.

In this difficult situation of expression or non-expression in interreligious and even intra-religious dialogues, there is nevertheless an agreement that applied dialogue is necessary, the latter being able to bring in many ethical issues. Many ethical themes such as abortion or traditional family values have brought to the fore the cooperation between Orthodox and Muslims, regarding the support of the traditional family. From here we can see that interreligious dialogue could be beneficial in obtaining the best ethical results.

If regarding ethical matters there might be a fruitful dialogue, in matters of doctrine any possibility of coming closer disappears from the vision of the fundamentalists. Here it all comes down to the idea of truth, and the truth, by definition, must be one. According to the ideology of fundamentalist theologians, the truth cannot be found through dialogue with other religions, as it was fully revealed through Jesus Christ. If interreligious dialogues cannot bring new things about Christ, then they would be defined, according to fundamentalist theologians, as simple attempts of theologies to redeem themselves, or to bring arguments for their own opinions that do not find their foundation in the revealed truth.

The truth itself cannot bring any change the interreligious dialogue. The revealed truth is characterized by the impossibility of its alteration. Therefore, any interreligious dialogue cannot issue requests to change the revealed truth, because this would mean an alteration of the latter. The only important activity that interreligious dialogues can trigger from a doctrinaire point of view is to discuss elements of the truth already revealed. "The presupposition of enrichment, complementarity or even convergence between the Christian tradition and other religions is an illusion⁵.

Any interreligious dialogue is often stuck when reaching the point of religious identity, because fundamentalist theologians understand this identity as a commitment to the faith, therefore generating clearly defined barriers in front of any other religion. The personal relationship with God is also related to religious identity. Here appears the distinction between

³ A. Droogers, *Evangelischen en oecumenischen over religieus pluralisme*, Boekencentrum, 1997, p. 62.

⁴ A. Droogers, *Evangelischen en oecumenischen over religieus pluralisme...*, p. 84.

⁵ M. Moyaert, *Fragile Identities Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2011.p. 51.

those who believe and those who do not believe, those who work for salvation and those who remain indifferent in sin.

In this context there is also the difference between Christians and other religions, the Christianity of fundamentalists being founded upon the difference between Christians and the others. Thus, appears the exclusivism from which would result "a strongly accentuated line that makes a distinction between being saved and being lost, between citizenship in the Kingdom of God and being excluded from it."⁶

In the same context, the commitment of faith is always accompanied by conviction and certainty⁷. Starting from here, identity and openness to dialogue seem to be mutually exclusive. This exclusivism of fundamentalist theology excludes the possibility of salvation coming from other religions, hence the lack of other religions when it comes to the truth revealed through Christ.

II. Interreligious dialogue from the perspective of inclusiveness

The interreligious dialogue is based upon four guidelines, from where the importance of the unity of all people is deducted, thus expressing an optimistic anthropological theology. This idea comes from the theology according to which God is the Author of the whole creation, and therefore of man, from where we understand that all people have the same origin⁸.

Starting from the common origin, it turns out that the humanity has also a common end, which is found in the Trinitarian God. Him, The Creator and Providence of all creation offers all mankind the same conditions of salvation. The message of the Gospel is also one, but it is interpreted differently according to different factors of theological traditions.

Inclusivism sees this different interpretation of the same Gospel message as the way God seeks communion with all people. Once the word is understood and one works for salvation according to the understanding, the effect of this approach would be the acquisition of the Kingdom of God.

This theological thinking is the exact opposite of exclusive theology. The central idea the inclusive theology is based upon does not refer to differences as a result of the fall of the forefathers, but has stabilized itself upon the idea of the connection of all, of the unity of all. This idea is the foundation of articulating any interreligious dialogue. If in exclusivist theology, the other was cut from the truth, in inclusive theology the other is a possible partner of dialogue, a possible partner in the process of knowing God based on revelation.

According to inclusive theology, interreligious dialogue does not contain the confession of faith in the form of proclamation, but each religion confesses the form of its own faith. There is no question of negotiating all faiths in order to reach a single faith that satisfies everyone. Interreligious dialogue is therefore the form of openness that allows every person to confess their own faith.

Conversions are elements that go beyond the field of interreligious dialogue. They are not achieved in ecumenical dialogues. In interreligious dialogue the main emphasis is on everyone's belonging to God⁹.

⁶ T. Sundermeier, *Pluralismus, Fundamentalismus, Koinonia*. Evangelische Theologie 54 (1994), pp. 293-310.

⁷ C.M. Gay, *Plurality, Ambiguity and Despair in Contemporary Theology*, in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 (1993), p. 209.

⁸ J. Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, New York: Orbis, 2001, p. 222.

⁹ J. Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, New York, 1997, p. 346.

III. The tension between identity and openness

This tension is the greatest danger for interreligious dialogue. Interreligious theology does not see the issue of identity as opposed to openness in dialogue towards other religions. According to this theology, there can be no opposition between the two, on the contrary, they should presuppose each other.

Christian identity must be fulfilled in interreligious dialogue. "To be a Christian does not only mean to find in Jesus Christ values that must be promoted or even a meaning for one's life, but to be totally committed and dedicated to His person, to find in Him the way to God"¹⁰.

From here we understand that the dialogue of faith does not mean a denial of one's beliefs. Each one of the equals that participate in the interreligious dialogue is aware of his own faith, therefore there is a sincerity of the dialogue and the latter cannot be reduced to negotiation. True negotiation related to faith is not carried out in interreligious dialogue, but in the personal life of each person, by fulfilling, as much as possible, the precepts of faith.

Interreligious dialogue does not mean the relativization of the saving character of the work of salvation of the human kind fulfilled by the Son of God. "Christian identity, as it has been understood over the centuries, is related to the belief in constitutive mediation and in the fullness of divine revelation in Jesus Christ, but they must be understood without reductionism or exclusive absolutism."¹¹

The complementarity between openness towards other religions and the identity of one's own faith is based on the action of the Holy Spirit, carried out in the process of dialogue: "The Spirit acts in both traditions involved in dialogue, in the Christian and in the other; thus the dialogue cannot be a monologue, that is, a unilateral process. The same God is the One who performs saving works in the history of mankind and who speaks to human beings in the depths of their hearts."¹²

If the emphasis of soteriological exclusivism often falls upon exclusivity, which brings a disservice to interreligious relations, the emphasis of inclusiveness is upon the search through dialogue of interreligious relations, and implicitly of the points of convergence. In this regard, inclusiveness is characterized by the desire for harmony and unity.

Inclusive thinking sees theology as a coherent whole on the basis of which a form of interfaith cooperation can be achieved¹³. However, inclusiveness also has a hierarchical character. The truth expressed through the religion of the other participants is considered true only if it is in accordance with one's own truth. Even within inclusiveness there is a form of tension between oneself and the other, and the balance of this model is based upon the desire to integrate the other to the detriment of the different, the particular. By including the desired inclusiveness, the particularity of each, the singularity of each is practically lost.

IV Conclusions

Interreligious dialogue is the environment where the self and the other learn from each other, they let themselves be touched by the other's alterity. The differences that Christian inclusivism perceives have as their topic the Christian truth about salvation. This truth has one form in Christianity and another form in other religions. The soteriological interpretation expresses how each religion relates to God and to the other religions. In other words, soteriology

¹⁰ J. Dupuis, *Renewal of Christianity Through Interreligious Dialogue*, in *International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 65 (2004), p. 131.

¹¹ J. Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*,... p. 230.

¹² J. Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*,... p. 230

¹³ K. McCarthy, *Reckoning with Religious Difference: Models of Interreligious Moral Dialogue*, in S.B. Twiss and B. Grelle (eds). *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative Religions Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue*. Boulder: Westview, 1998, p. 101.

is the key to understanding a religion, and this chapter is primarily a Christian one. Religions that do not know God are limited to talking about the power of the universe and other powers towards which the latter would tend, while Christianity is talking about a God who revealed Himself out of love for man, just so that man, the crown of creation, tends not toward an impersonal force, but towards a Personal, Living God, with whom man has the capacity to get into a dialogue.

References

- [1] **Droogers A.**, *Evangelischen en oecumenischen over religieus pluralisme*, Boekencentrum, 1997
- [2] **Demarest B.A.**, *General and Special Revelation: Epistemological Foundations of Religious Pluralism*, in A.D. Clarke and B.B. Winter (eds). *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, Paternoster Press, 1992
- [3] **Muck C.**, *Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue*, in *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 (1993)
- [4] **Gay C.M.**, *Plurality, Ambiguity and Despair in Contemporary Theology*, in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 (1993)
- [5] **J.Dupuis**, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, New York: Orbis, 2001
- [6] **Dupuis J.**, *Renewal of Christianity Through Interreligious Dialogue*, in *International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 65 (2004)
- [7] **Dupuis J.**, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, New York, 1997
- [8] **McCarthy K.**, *Reckoning with Religious Difference: Models of Interreligious Moral Dialogue*, in S.B. Twiss and B. Grelle (eds). *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative Religions Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue*. Boulder: Westview, 1998
- [9] **Moyaert M.**, *Fragile Identities Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2011
- [10] **Sundermeier T.**, *Pluralismus, Fundamentalismus, Koinonia*. *Evangelische Theologie* 54 (1994)