

The double sense of recognition in interreligious theology

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The title of the following reflection on similarities and differences across religious boundaries has got two cues: “recognition” and “interreligious theology”.

In the English idiom, recognition can either mean rediscovery of things familiar (in Norwegian: “gjenkjenning”) or acknowledgment of something that may be distinctively unfamiliar but is still worthy of appreciation (in Norwegian: “anerkjennning”, cf. the English expression “politics of recognition”). In the encounter with other faiths, I may recognize essential features of faith that are equally dear to me. But just as often, I face the challenge of coming to terms with conceptions and practices that are foreign and do not give any immediate sense to me. Can I still acknowledge and appreciate such conceptions and practices, as expressions of a God-given diversity? Sometimes I can, in other cases not.

In this essay, I will reflect upon the double sense of recognition (as rediscovery and appreciation) in interreligious theology. I use the term “interreligious theology” as a reference to dialogical reflection on ultimate questions, carried out in the space between different religious universes. With “the space between”, I allude to Martin Buber’s conception of a sacred realm which opens when people of different faiths speak profoundly to one another, from heart to heart:

In the most powerful moments of dialogic, where in truth “deep calls unto deep”, it becomes unmistakably clear that it is not the wand of the individual or of the social, but of a third which draws the circle round the happening. On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of “between” (Buber 2002: 242f).

By its focus on dialogue, the notion of interreligious theology transcends “theology of religion” which is usually conceived of as a systematic reflection on the relation between different faiths carried out by the “I” in Buber’s sense. As it will be used in this essay, interreligious theology approximates the notion of “comparative theology” as used by Francis X. Clooney and Paul F. Knitter (Knitter 2002: 202-214). In contrast to detached comparison, Knitter defines comparative theology as a dialogical effort that (in Buber’s sense) can only be carried out in a living encounter between I and Thou. As Knitter notes, comparative theologians are wary of grand comparisons between religions as monolithic entities. They prefer instead to focus on specific texts, concrete rituals or focused beliefs (ibid: 207).

Recognition as discovery of similarity

When encountering a foreign religion, the first impulse is often apologetic. In an apologetic approach, one searches for perceptions of faith that may confirm standard conceptions of the world religions as fundamentally different in their conceptions of God, the human being, salvation and ethics. If one opts for a more dialogical approach, the primary impulse is rather to seek for resemblances. Whereas the apologetic theologian has to face the question of how to accommodate for real resemblances, anyone inclined to finding similarities must face the question of how to avoid the danger of reducing the faith of the Other to merely more of the same (from the vantage point of the I). According to Levinas, the challenge of any dialogue is how to approach the Other while respecting the distance of incomprehensiveness. *In Of God who comes to mind*, he speaks of

... the extraordinary and immediate relation of dialogue, which transcends this distance without suppressing it or recu-

perating it, as does the gaze that crosses the distance separating it from an object in the world, while comprehending and encompassing that distance (Levinas 1998: 144).

However, for theologians who want to engage in dialogue the first impulse is often to look for resemblances and ways to cross the distance. A lucid example of this approach can be found in an essay by Peggy Starkey entitled “Agape: A Christian criterion of truth in the other world religions”. Her essay was published in the World Council of Churches’ *International Review of Mission* in 1985, together with a number of responses from ecumenical theologians (Starkey 1985).

Critically recognizing that a neutral approach to other faiths is simply impossible, Starkey states that “In evaluating other religions, a theologian must begin from the perspective of his or her own religion” (ibid: 425). In tune with Knitter’s definition of comparative theology, Starkey signals her intention to address the question of *truth* (Knitter 2002: 207). But her vantage point is clearly that of the Christian I: “... from a Christian perspective it can be said that other religions contain truth insofar as they contain revelation that requires a human response of love (*agape*) toward other human beings” (Starkey 1985: 435).

Starkey defines the Christian concept of *agape* as “selfless love” inspired by God and constituting “a way of life” for the believer (ibid: 434). In her examination of relevant passages from the holy scriptures of other world religions, Starkey seems to aim at recognition in the sense of rediscovery: “... I am presenting what a Christian might find revelatory and salvific in these religions insofar as they appear to express or echo the Christian concept of *agape*” (ibid: 435).

Her conclusion attests to the truth of Jesus’ saying in Matthew 7: 7, “Seek and you will find”. In Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism as well as Confucianism Starkey finds echoes of *agape* in “the numerous appeals for compassion or sympathy, charity or benevolence, mercy, loving-kindness, respect, justice, forgiveness, uprightness and selflessness or self-sacrifice” (ibid: 462f). Who could hope for more, when these qualities are defined not only as moral ideals but as “saving values” as well (cf. Dupuis 1997: 321-326)?

What Starkey found, was more of the same from the vantage point of Christian theology, or rather, from the perspective of a particular perception of Christian soteriology which emphasizes the completion of true faith in good works (cf. James 2: 22). Other theologians take a different point of departure in their search for resemblances between Christian tenets and similar conceptions in other religions. In the following, I exemplify how some Reformed and Lutheran theologians have searched for interreligious confirmation of the concept of salvation by faith alone.

When Karl Barth sets out to define “True religion” in *Church Dogmatics* (Vol. I, Part 2, § 17), he is emphatic that neither Christianity nor other religions can be true other than in the sense of proclaiming that the human being is saved by divine grace alone – i.e. not as a fulfilled practitioner of *agape*, but as a justified sinner (Barth 1988: 325f). Religions (including Christianity) are only true insofar as they proclaim the doctrine of *iustificatio impii* (ibid: 337). In the view of Barth, what is at stake is not the truth or falseness of Christianity or any other historical religion, but the metaphysical reality of grace itself (ibid: 339).

According to Barth, the reality of divine grace as revealed by Christ constitutes the center of Christianity but is not exclusively (and not always) preached by the Christian religion. Barth finds that the reality of grace is also reflected in a particular strand of Buddhism, namely Pure Land Buddhism (*jodo shin-shu*) which was developed in Japan in the 12th and 13th centuries. The scriptures of its founding teachers Genku-Honen and Shinran anchor salvation not in successful discipline but in Amida Buddha’s grace alone. In the conventional view, Pure Land Buddhism was developed as an alternative to the spiritual disciplines of Zen Buddhism that were widely considered as too severe for the masses and therefore unattainable as a path to salvific enlightenment. Instead, Pure Land Buddhism invites the believer to put his trust in the “primal vow” of Amida Buddha – relying completely on the “other power” (*tariki*) of grace instead of the highly limited power of the self (*jriki*) to improve one’s ways.

Seemingly striking a reformed alliance across religious boundaries, Barth speaks of Pure Land Buddhism as “Japanese Protestantism” and considers also the Hindu *Bhakti* religion as another Eastern parallel to the Protestant conception of grace (ibid: 341f).

Rather triumphant on Reformed Christianity's behalf, he suggests that

... the most adequate and comprehensive and illuminating heathen parallel to Christianity, a religious development in the Far East, is parallel not to Roman or Greek Catholicism, but to Reformed Christianity, thus confronting Christianity with the question of its truth even as the logical religion of grace (ibid: 340).

Conversely, Barth notes that Francis Xavier, the co-founder of the Jesuit order who was also the first Christian missionary to live in Japan, rediscovered in Pure Land Buddhism the "Lutheran heresy" (ibid: 341).

Although one might not agree with Barth's attempt at striking a Protestant-Buddhist alliance against Catholicism, the example testifies to the fact that profound theological disagreement does not in any way coincide with the boundaries of the religions. It cuts right across those boundaries and interreligious dialogue leads often to a renewed reflection on diversity and tensions in one's own religion.

With a background in Scandinavian Lutheranism, my colleague at the Faculty of Theology in Oslo Notto R. Thelle took a similar interest in Pure Land Buddhism in the first phases of his work as a missionary in Japan. In an early article about Buddhism and Christianity, published in *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon* in 1974 (Thelle 1974), he recognizes in Shinran's Pure Land teachings some central insights of Paul in the New Testament. Hence Thelle gives his translation of and commentary to the Pure Land "gospel" of *Tannisho* the title "A Buddhist Epistle to the Romans".

As Thelle explains, the hope of being reborn in the Pure Land of Amida rests not on good deeds but merely on Amida Buddha's vow which is appropriated by the believer by the recitation of the Nembutsu formula of refuge. Even the desire to recite the Nembutsu suffices (*Tannisho* ch. 1). Coming astonishing close to Pauline insights, the opening of *Tannisho* ch. 3 reads as follows: "If the righteous enter into life, how much more in the case of sinners."

But Thelle notes also important differences between the Pauli-

ne conception of salvation by grace and the seemingly parallel teachings of *Tannishō*. For instance, sin is not understood by Shinran as guilt to be forgiven but rather as blindness. Furthermore, being born in the Pure Land does not imply any personal union with Amida – the aim is enlightenment, not a communion of love. The similarities are nevertheless striking enough to confuse any idea of neat boundaries between religious universes. They inspire an interreligious conversation about salvation that explores difference on the basis of unexpected recognition.

In a similar vein as Thelle (and Barth), the Danish theologian Theodor Jørgensen has found reflections of the Lutheran doctrine of *sola fide* (justification by faith alone) in Hindu Bhakti piety (Jørgensen 2000). Posing the question “Can non-Christians be justified by faith?” Jørgensen interprets the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone as reflecting a basic human experience, namely that of receiving life as an undeserved gift. As a fundamentally human experience, it is also potentially interreligious in its theological explication.

Jørgensen points to a Bhakti text from the 17th century in which the believer brings his countless sins to the loving heart of God and praises Vishnu for having liberated him from the prison of self-love (ibid: 377). In addition, Jørgensen refers to a secular hymn by Benny Andersen in which the Danish poet praises the gift of a fresh morning which bestows its blessings upon us in spite of our shortcomings.

Jørgensen’s underlying assumption, which is well in tune with a strong undercurrent of Scandinavian creation theology, is that the doctrine of *sola fide* tells something profound about human experience which can also be recognized outside the realm of the Christian revelation.

What unites the interreligious approaches of Barth, Thelle and Jørgensen is their point of departure in particular features of Reformed or Lutheran Christianity. Although the Christian notion of saving grace is clearly more Catholic than recognized by Barth, he points the way to an interreligious conversation that leaves the broad stereotypes behind and focuses instead on particular teachings, rituals and practices as they appear in concrete forms of Christian, Buddhist, Hindu etc. religion (as well as in secular forms of spirituality).

On the narrow ridge between similarity and difference

In later parts of Notto R. Thelle's writings, he keeps searching for similarities between particular forms of Christianity and particular forms of Buddhism. But he addresses also the challenging *differences* between Buddhism and Christianity, such as the painful but inspiring challenges that Zen Buddhism poses to Christians who expose themselves to serious Zen practices. In his book "Who can stop the wind?" Thelle tells his personal story of being profoundly challenged by Zen spirituality to anchor his faith in *being* rather than in *words* (Thelle 1991: 18-25). However, as his translation of Zen texts into Norwegian reveals (Thelle 2001), he retains his Pauline-cum-Pure Land focus on the painful experience of not being able to meet the demands of spiritual and moral discipline. Thus his collection of Zen texts ends with the poems of Santoka Taneda (1882-1940), a Japanese monk who (against the background of a failed marriage and notorious problems with alcohol) reflects spiritually on his *failure* to comply with the ideals of his religion. Like Benny Andersen in Jørgensen's interpretation, Santoka finds comfort in the grace of nature that encompasses him in spite of his painful shortcomings: "All pines / lower their branches / and adore / The merciful who looks down" – i.e. the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara/Kannon (ibid: 220; in my translation to English).

For Thelle, the encounter with Japanese Buddhism seems to have brought with it unexpected rediscovery of central elements in his own faith as well as appreciation of challenging differences that have put his Christian faith to test. As one can clearly sense from Thelle's books, his reflection on the double sense of recognition has not been carried out as a detached Self-reflection. It has been nourished by and carried out as "interreligious theology", in living dialogue with Buddhist Others.

In my own experience from Christian-Muslim dialogue, I have felt a similar tension between rediscovery of the familiar and exposition to something that is distinctively different and challenging. As both Christianity and Islam belong to the Abrahamic family of faith, there is good reason to expect more similarity between these faiths than between Christianity and Eastern religions. Christian and Muslim theologians bent on apologetics will nevertheless be able to find a number of allegedly fundamental diffe-

rences between the two religions. In contrast, dialogically minded theologians will often find far more similarities between the two religions than what the average believer would normally be ready to subscribe to.

In an effort at self-scrutiny, I recognize the latter tendency in myself. As a Lutheran theologian, I too have been interested in finding possible points of convergence with Islam for the idea of salvation by grace alone. But is that possible at all? Isn't Islam the religion of law par excellence, a "doctrine of works" as Luther had it (Luther 1958-, vol. 46: 177)? That depends on the eye of the beholder. When my undergraduate students explore the relation between Christianity and Islam, they read also a selection of texts by the 13th century Muslim mystic Rumi. One of the texts that have been selected carries the title "The man who looked back on his way to hell" (Mathnawi V: 1806-1846, cf. Nicholson 1995: 56f). In this story, Rumi presents us with a morally failed person which is saved from hell by divine love that appears to be utterly undeserved. When the guardian angels drag the poor man towards hell, he sees before him a black scroll in which his plentiful mischief is carefully listed. The man readily admits that the truth of his life is even worse than what is written. But instead of despairing, he makes a final appeal to the grace of God:

Beyond living righteously or behaving disobediently – I had a (great) hope in Thy pure lovingkindness ... I turn my face back to that pure grace: I am not looking towards my own actions. I turn my hope towards that hope, for Thou hast given me existence older than of old. Thou gavest (me) existence, free of cost, as a robe of honour: I have always relied on that (generosity) (Mathnawi V: 1839-1843).

And God says: "O angels, bring him back to Us, for his inward eye has (ever) been (turned) towards hope. Like one who reckons of naught, We will set him free and cancel all his trespasses" (Mathnawi V: 1845f).

In other words: I too found what I was looking for, a sample of the pure gospel of grace within Islam. Against the objection that Rumi's gospel of grace might not be representative of the central tenets of Islam, I would suggest that the poor fellow in Rumi's

story, in his final appeal to God, could be seen as simply repeating the very heartbeat of Muslim devotion. I'm referring to the *basmala* formula "in the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful" – which prefaces every chapter of the Qur'an and every serious endeavour by a Muslim.

Can painful differences be appreciated?

The *basmala* resembles the heartbeat of Christian devotion. But it's still different, having been transposed to a different religious universe. The Muslim faith in divine grace is mediated by rites that are different from those of Christianity, through rituals that probably also evoke different religious emotions. But against the conventional wisdom that Islamic rituals are geared towards obedient submission and not towards loving communion with God, it should be noted that unity with the God of Love is exactly the aim of Sufi rituals, not least the ones that are practiced in Rumi's Mevlevi order.

Whether a Christian rediscovery of the gospel of pure grace in Islam tells something true about Islam or only testifies to the distorting perception of a Christian theologian, can in fact be transformed to a question of who decides what is central and what is peripheral in a given religious tradition. Depending on the perspective of your choice, Islam as well as Christianity may take the form either of a religion of law or of a religion of grace.

The emphasis may be different in both religions, and the meditation of grace is conceived of in different terms and practiced in highly different rituals (which in the case of Islam gives no space for communion with God in Christ). But the very dialectic between salvation by faith alone and the saving values of selfless love can be found in Christianity as well as Islam. If Christians and Muslims engage each other in a serious conversation about grace and selfless love, why shouldn't believers of both religions become as enlightened and enriched as Roman Catholics and Lutherans have been through recent ecumenical talks about faith and good works?

In Christian-Muslim dialogue, many similarities can be discovered in the way we conceive of God, salvation and the relation between grace and good works. In the case of striking differences, we will often find that our disagreements run right across reli-

gious boundaries. For instance, the relation between grace and good works is just as much a topic for intra-Christian, ecumenical conversation as for interreligious, say Christian-Muslim dialogue.

I am not implying that ecumenical conversation and interreligious dialogue is one and the same thing. What unites Christians, across painful confessional differences, is a common faith in the mediating and redemptive role of Christ. Therefore in interreligious dialogue, Christians are challenged to rethink the relation between certain elements of faith (e.g., salvation by grace alone) and the (exclusive or not) anchoring of these elements in Christ's redemptive work.

When doing interreligious theology, Christians can hardly avoid the pain that comes with the recognition that Christ is seen in a distinctively different light in Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam compared to the constitutive role of Jesus Christ in the Christian faith. Can painful differences in the image of Jesus Christ still be recognized as something valuable to be appreciated?

In conclusion, I will point to a contemporary Muslim how has answered this question in the positive. In an essay about the dialogical relationship between Christianity and Islam, published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* in 1972, the Shi'ite Muslim thinker Hasan Askari writes about the discovery of the religiously Other as a soothing as well as painful experience: "The discovery of the other, of our own being, is both soothing and painful, more the latter. The other is pain, a sting, a bite, but a pain in our very being, of it". Maybe indicative of a Shi'ite sensitivity towards the religious significance of suffering, he adds: 'It is right in the middle of this pain that a Divine sign is known' (Askari 1972: 486).

Askari sees both the human mind and divine revelation as essentially dialogical in nature. Exposing the dialogical relation between Christianity and Islam, Askari focuses much of his attention on the two religions' different perceptions of Christ (as the Word of God incarnate and one of God's prophets respectively). Convinced that Christianity and Islam constitute 'a dialogical whole', Askari speaks of Christ as a common sign of God for Christians and Muslims, a sign that by virtue of being understood differently 'liberates man from the dead circle of monological religion and restores unto him his genuine dialogical existence' (ibid: 483).

According to Askari, the fact of conflicting interpretations should not be regarded as a threat, but rather as a reflection of what a divine sign implies: 'It is the very ambiguity, richness, of the religious sign that gives rise to different and even opposed interpretations and understandings' (ibid.: 485). He concludes that Christianity and Islam constitute in fact 'one complex of faith' – one starting with the living Person, the other with the written Word: 'Their separateness does not denote two areas of conflicting truths, but a dialogical necessity' (ibid.: 485).

It is in this theological context that Askari speaks of the discovery of the Other as both soothing and painful, as a sting in our Selfhood. According to Askari, a dialogical relationship based solely on the recognition of similarities, is lacking something – not only in its human qualities but also in its divine purpose.

If Askari is right, interreligious theology must try to integrate the pain of difference as something that might even be willed by God. Maybe this is also the nature of doing theology on the narrow ridge that Buber's speaks of? 'On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of "between"' (Buber 2002: 242f).

In tune with Buber's metaphor, but with a surprising twist, the Finnish New Testament scholar Heikki Räisänen has spoken of Jesus Christ as "standing between" Christians and Muslims. In his book *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma*, he writes:

Jesus has of old stood 'between Christianity and Islam' in the sense that his different position in the two religions has been a hindrance to an encounter. Yet today it is also possible to think that he stands between the two (actually between three religions, for Judaism should be included in a 'trialogue') in the opposite sense: in the no man's land, or on the common ground which does not belong to a any single party. Jesus was not a Christian, and his vision overlaps only partially with Christianity. Nor was he a Muslim, though Muslims are right in esteeming him and finding points of contact with Islam in his message. He stands in-between (Räisänen 1997: 96f).

Although the image of Jesus Christ standing "in-between" Christians, Muslims and Jews is a meaningful one, I find Räisänen's visi-

on of Christ as standing in “the no man’s land” and constituting a “common ground” more problematic. From a critical perspective, Christ is only accessible through out the believers’ differing interpretations of the sign that he constitutes. This means that in any dialogue about Christ “in-between”, believers are turned towards one another and must be able integrate the pain of conflicting faiths.

In that perspective, Askari’s reflection on the painful but opening ambiguity of a divine sign tunes in with Buber’s vision of I and Thou doing theology not on common ground, but on a narrow ridge where all partners in dialogue might be as vulnerable as Christ himself.

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