

Epistemological Basis in Interfaith Dialogues – a Neglected Issue?

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The aim of this article is to examine how different epistemological positions may influence interfaith dialogues. The kind of dialogue where information and discussions on topics of central beliefs are the subject matters is emphasized.

1 Interfaith Dialogue – a Generally Accepted, but Controversial Concept

The word “dialogue” occurs frequently in literature on Christian mission and ecumenical issues. Christian mission cannot avoid entering into some kind of dialogue with people of other faiths and worldviews. What interfaith dialogue actually is, or which kinds or forms of dialogue can be applied in Christian mission, is, however, a question of much debate. We may at least include the following categories:¹ (1) Informal, casual conversations in daily life, in which a Christian may appear as a witness. (2) Mutual information and discussions on matters of common concern in the civil society, for peace and joint action. (3) Mutual information and discussions on matters of beliefs and doctrines – in which the parties defend their positions and question and challenge one another in a shared search for truth; the parties are often more official representatives of the two faiths. (4) Events of

participation in one another's spiritual experiences such as meditation and prayers.

The concept of dialogue has for several decades played a central role in discussions and documents on mission presented by the World Council of Churches (WCC). WCC's general assembly in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1968 raised the question of "dialogue with the non-Christian religions", and promoted a kind of dialogue based on a belief in a syncretistic common core of all religions. Even before the Uppsala meeting, the WCC had established a sub-unit entitled "Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies". During the 1970s this unit conducted a number of meetings with representatives of other faiths. In 1979 the WCC published its *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*.²

Evangelical theologians rejected the kind of dialogue which aims at establishing a common religious core. At a conference in Lausanne in 1974, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE) was established and the Lausanne Covenant endorsed. Its article 3 expressed a sceptical attitude to dialogue as presented by the WCC. In the second major LCWE conference held in Manila in 1989, the notion of dialogue was, however, included as an aspect of its mission methodology.

David J. Bosch's textbook *Transforming Mission*, has been regarded as the most comprehensive standard work on the theology of mission for more than a decade. Bosch includes only a small section of seven pages on "Dialogue and Mission".³ In their new, comprehensive textbook on missiology, the Catholic scholars Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder list "interreligious dialogue" as one of six major components of Christian mission.⁴

The LWF includes a paragraph on dialogue in its latest document on mission, *Mission in Context*, of 2004.⁵ Traditional Lutherans are hardly comfortable with its openness towards a so-called "sharing together of a spiritual journey of the souls as people of faiths".⁶ It reflects too much the kind of dialogue of participations in one another's religious practices and experiences of meditation and prayers (the fourth kind in the list above).

The notion of dialogue is only briefly dealt with in the standard Norwegian textbook on missiology, *Missiologi i dag*, edited by Jan-Martin Berentsen, Tormod Engelsen and Knud Jør-

gensen.⁷ The book points to the New Testament's emphasis on dialogue as a method of approaching individuals and groups, with Jesus and Paul as the major models.⁸ It is distinguished between three theologically legitimate aims for interfaith dialogues: (1) solving problems of common concern in the local society; (2) obtaining a better understanding of the other faith and its adherents; and (3) challenging to renewed and deeper reflection on oneself and on the message of the Bible.

2 The Question of Epistemological Basis

A characteristic feature of our time is extensive epistemological uncertainty. One of the first missiologists to recognize the implications of the present epistemological variety for Christian mission was Paul Hiebert.⁹ David J. Bosch likewise pointed to the problem in his textbook on missiology.¹⁰

An international study group known as the "epistemology and mission group", active from 1992 to 1997, has explored this issue most comprehensively. The group's conclusions, and several articles by the group members, are published in the book *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge*.¹¹ The group was particularly engaged in changes in philosophical epistemology during the last century, as related to mission and evangelization.¹² The aim of the group was "... to analyze and evaluate both the opportunities and difficulties for mission of this particular aspect of Western culture."¹³ And the group concludes: "... the area of epistemology is not marginal to mission reflection and action, but raises acute, central concerns that missiology cannot afford to ignore if it wishes to engage realistically and self-consciously with the relevance of Christian faith ..."¹⁴

They warn: "If there is no agreed epistemological basis for judging the adequacy of particular beliefs and values, it would seem to follow that the claims that Christians make for the gospel are no more valid than any other religious or secular claims."¹⁵ The challenging question to Christian mission is, they claim: "If the universality of the gospel vanishes in the face of epistemological relativism, would not the mandate to make it known universally have to be rejected as epistemological imperialism?"¹⁶

As expressed initially, the aim of this article is to examine how different epistemological positions involved in the current debate

may influence particularly the third kind of dialogue listed above – mutual information and discussions on matters of beliefs and doctrines.

The first step then is to outline the main groups of epistemological positions (section 3). Then follows the major aim – to examine how these different positions may influence dialogues of the third kind, discussions on beliefs and doctrines, in different ways (sections 4 and 5). A major proposition is that neither strongly objectivistic views, nor radically relativistic positions are able to engage in meaningful dialogues of this kind.

3 A Brief Outline of Different Epistemological Positions

A central epistemological question is: What are the reasons, or the justification, for accepting one description of reality as the true one, and for rejecting as false those descriptions which contradict this? Or more moderately, how can we judge the relative plausibility of the various accounts of reality?

I will now give a brief presentation of a common classification of epistemological positions. I operate with roughly three main categories: On the one side we have the objectivists or *foundationalists* who base their truth claims on what they regard as self-evidently true foundations. On the other side we have the rather subjectivistic and relativistic *non-foundationalists* who hardly accept any truth claim at all. A range of in-between positions reject both these extremes. These may be named *post-foundationalists*.¹⁷

3.1 Objectivistic Positions – Foundationalism

Objectivistic positions, such as classic foundationalism, claim that there are some basic beliefs which are universally and finally evident beyond any kind of reasonable doubt. Such beliefs are regarded as self-evident or intuitively obvious, in no need of being proved by other beliefs. Mathematical axioms and immediate sense experiences are understood as basic beliefs. From such basic beliefs a whole system of beliefs can be deduced. True science of whatever field is limited to knowledge of self-evidenced basic beliefs and whatever can be derived from them. Truth is a matter of correspondence or rather congruence (strict correspondence) between our languages and the way things are.

Some religions, such as classic Islam and fundamentalist versions of Christian theology, may reckon some of their fundamental beliefs as self-evidently true and basic in such a way that they cannot be subject to examination and doubt. This is the fideist version of classic foundationalism.¹⁸ The foundationalist position is a characteristic of what is often named the “modern project”, initiated by Descartes and the Enlightenment rationality.

Ontologically, this position corresponds with *external realism*. *Realism* is the view that the world (reality) exists as something over against and independent of the ways humans think about it and describe it. *External realism* in addition claims that reality is also differentiated independently of the mind’s activities and interpretations of it. Therefore, it is reality which determines our conceptual schemes about the world. Things may be known exactly as they are. This position may also be named *naïve or common-sense realism*.

The appeal to self-evidence is, of course, open to the charge that those who believe in the existence of “self-evident” foundations do not all agree on what is thus self-evident or obvious.¹⁹ There has been a steady erosion of the objectivistic position. It is hardly possible today to maintain that one’s thinking is totally free from cultural, historical, and linguistic conditioning.²⁰

3.2 Subjectivistic and Relativistic Positions – Non-Foundationalism

Subjectivistic and relativistic positions tend to hold that we cannot presume any over-contextual and universal contact points or frame of reference for the justification of beliefs as true, or as more plausible than other beliefs. We are confined in our contexts which are only relatively true – true for ourselves, or at best, for the group of people sharing our faith. The least radical representatives of subjectivism may accept the possibility of establishing some internal logical consistence and inner coherence in one’s belief system as evidences for oneself from which one is justified in believing what one believes.

The epistemological positions which represent such tendencies towards relativistic subjectivism are, for example, contextualism, historicism, pragmatism, and more or less also epistemic coherentism which makes justification a function solely of coherence between the beliefs of a belief system.²¹

Positions of epistemological subjectivism and relativism are associated with similar views regarding the metaphysical questions of what truth and reality is. We are discouraged from asking for any universal truth. There is no truth except those which each community or individual creates for himself/ herself.

The stand named *internal realism* claims that to the extent that there is a mind-independent reality, it is inaccessible to us; nothing certain can be said about it. Reality is only available from our own point of view.²² Truth for us (plural) cannot be anything but that which we can agree on intersubjectively.

Metaphysical antirealists oppose the very notion that there exists a true world and reality.²³ "Reality" is only what the human imagination makes it to be through mental activities and linguistic practices. Pragmatism acclaims such ontology. The pragmatic theory of truth says that truth is that which works.

Epistemologically, the subjectivist and relativist positions are typical of movements characterized as *postmodern*. Such positions naturally tend to mean that all faiths and ideologies are equally true, or rather equally useful for their adherents. As the Hindu philosopher Swami Vivekananda proclaimed in his address of welcome at the opening of the First World Parliament of Religions in Chicago on September 11, 1893: "We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions to be true."²⁴

The fundamental objection against the relativist positions is that they are self-contradictory.²⁵ A relativist system depends on an unarticulated normative basis of its own, namely the anti-relative and self-contradictory belief that truth is relative. Relativists claim as a truth that truth cannot be claimed.

Moreover, relativism promotes a kind of tolerance that makes it impossible to exclude toleration of intolerance. When relativists condemn as oppressive and disrespectful those systems which regard truth as one, the relativists themselves appear as quite oppressive and disrespectful. They disclaim other thinkers their right to claim that their faiths are universally true. For this reason relativists disclaim as oppressive the Christian claim of the uniqueness of Christ and of Scripture as God's final and authoritative revelation. The idea of a Christian mission is, of course, even more challenged and accused of being oppressive by such an understanding of truth. In this way relativism may appear as quite

authoritative and intolerant – actually, contradicting the basic human right to manifest one’s faith.²⁶

3.3 Intermediate Positions – Post-Foundationalism

Alternatives to an objectivism of the classical foundationalism are not necessarily the various kinds of subjective relativism. Many, if not most, epistemological views position themselves somewhere in between these radical wings. Among these we find *modest foundationalism* (Thomas Reid²⁷), *moderate foundationalism* (Robert Audi²⁸), *presumptionism* (Mikael Stenmark²⁹), *experientialism* (Alvin Plantinga³⁰), *reliabilism* (Alvin Goldman³¹), *modified or moderate presuppositional foundationalism* (J. Andrew Kirk³²), *foundherentism* (Susan Haack³³), *fallibilist traditionalism* (Andy F. Sanders³⁴), and *post-foundationalism* (F. LeRon Shults and Kurt Christensen³⁵). Those among these scholars who affiliate themselves with the Christian faith (several of them do so), also hold that their kind of epistemology is consistent with traditional Christianity. I will now give a brief outline of the main characteristics these intermediate positions have in common. I name them by the term “post-foundationalism”.

Reality is Mind-Independent – Truth is not Relative

These positions of epistemology are normally associated with the kind of metaphysical views on reality and truth characterized as *critical realism*. Realism affirms that reality exists as mind-independent and is differentiated independently of our comprehension of it. The adjective “critical” points to the matter that an individual’s view of reality is always coloured by that individual’s perspective or horizon of understanding.³⁶ Regarding the material reality we experience around us, although we cannot claim to see it exactly as it is in itself, we can expect to possess a lot of knowledge about it which we may regard as sufficiently certain.

Truth is a matter of *correspondence*, or rather *correlation* (weak correspondence), between our language and reality. A true belief is a reliable representation of the world, not a useful fiction. Thus, truth is one, and we need to distinguish between true and false. A viable Christian theology cannot but claim that truth is one, or else it contradicts the very core of the classical Christian faith.³⁷

Human Perception and Understanding is Partial and Fallible

Although the world exists, and the truth about it is one, our knowledge of reality can only be partial and fallible. As contextual, finite and fallible humans we have no access to any totally neutral, objective and universal observation point. We can never escape the prejudgements and horizon of understanding provided by our life-worlds. All of our experiences will always have to be interpreted within the frame provided by our horizon of understanding. Therefore, we may easily be mistaken and hold false beliefs. This means that against relativism one's truth claims are proposed as universally valid, while against objectivism one maintains that truth claims can never be ultimately proved, at least not while seeing "as in a mirror", as Paul expressed it.

Initially we choose – or rather, someone else has chosen for us – a standpoint from which we begin to interpret the world. We naturally start from the worldview we have inherited from our tradition.³⁸ Such an initial choice is unavoidable. Moreover, it can be considered as rational to stick to the tradition and faith within which one is raised, and regard this as true as long as no alternative has appeared as better.³⁹

Truth Indicators – General Plausibility Criteria

Since truth about things and state of affairs in the world is one, and the world in which we exist is real, some kind of criteria for evaluating what is true or at least plausible, are likely to be available. To establish a set of *commonly acknowledged truth criteria*, or *plausibility criteria*, or *truth indicators*, is of greatest importance for the post-foundationalist positions. It is only on a basis of common truth criteria one can be regarded as accountable for defending one's belief system. A rather detailed examination and presentation of such criteria is given in Kurt Christensen's study on the challenges postmodernism presents to Christianity.⁴⁰

On the one hand, such broadly accepted truth criteria are the rational ones of logical consistence and inner coherence of one's specific beliefs with one's total system of beliefs, and logical consistence and internal coherence in the system as a whole.⁴¹ This does not exclude the legitimacy of clarifying subject matters at the edge of our understanding in paradoxes when the matter in question cannot be expressed in plainly consistent ways at the level of our present abilities of understanding.

On the other hand, there are the strong evidential truth criteria of coherence with our personal, immediate sense experiences, and coherence with those experiences collected in our memory. Most people will also emphasize internal experiences of various kinds, such as religious experiences. From a Christian point of view the experience of the Holy Spirit's illumination of Scripture belongs to such experiences.⁴² This includes the Spirit's work as he "convicts the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8), and as he "guides you into all truth" (John 16:13).

Of evidential value is also coherence with what we are told from sense experiences of other people, e.g., those given us in historical accounts and stories of the history of humankind. This includes the biblical history of revelation. Such accounts on history of past times will naturally have to be more critically evaluated than present experiences.

Since personal experiences are included as a decisive truth criterion – in practice for many Christians the most decisive – it would be a great mistake to accuse the claim for truth criteria as representing a rational *theologia gloria*. A reasoning within the frame of the truth criteria here presented, can definitely be seen as fully compatible with a theologizing within the frame of a *theologia crucis*.

Our beliefs and our total system of beliefs should not be protected from being tested against these truth indicators. And if we accept to put the plausibility of our beliefs and belief systems to the test in the light of these truth criteria, we are bound to regard the conclusions as plausible, although not proved with absolute certainty.

Andy S. Sanders concludes regarding Christian beliefs, "In order to be justified, Christian beliefs should be both experientially anchored and explanatorily integrated (foundherentism). There is no compelling reason to think that the Christian faith cannot be justified in that way"⁴³ This means that the Christian belief in the Bible as the testimony of God's authoritative revelation has to be defended by arguments based on the mentioned truth criteria. It cannot be based merely on a claim of authority from the Bible itself. Such a claim ends in a circle argumentation which may equally legitimate any scripture claiming to be divine

revelation as the highest authority. Interestingly, several of the biblical authors challenge their readers to investigate the evidences for their message.⁴⁴

Mutual Accountability, and Intellectual Virtues

On the basis of truth criteria we will always be liable to tests of our beliefs and total faiths. This means that we may have to modify many of our specific beliefs as we acquire new and deeper insights.⁴⁵ Being devoted to honesty, we may even feel compelled to abandon our total faith or belief system if new, consequential experiences may require that we do so. As Sanders holds with regard to the Christian faith:

“...although there is a Christian duty to trust in God, this does not imply a duty, let alone an unconditional one, to go on believing that there is a God if the arguments against God’s existence were to become cumulatively overwhelming. The requirement of unconditional faith has its place within the system of Christian belief, but cannot properly be interpreted as an obligation to continue to embrace the system itself.”

For interfaith dialogues on the basis of post-foundationalist epistemological positions, this means that the parties regard themselves as mutually accountable on the basis of common truth criteria, accepted by both sides as a common ground. This also means that both parties have to be open to the possibility and the risk of having been mistaken. However, as Sanders concludes, “... while acknowledging that our knowledge is fallible, partial, and corrigible (fallibilism). As long as no cumulatively overwhelming contrary evidence is met, and no better alternative is available, we are rational in fully accepting what we believe.”⁴⁷

When emphasizing honesty, openness, humility, accountability, tolerance, and non-manipulation as elements of one’s epistemology, one highlights central ethical virtues. Kevin J. Vanhoozer underscores in general the role of *epistemic or intellectual virtues* in the process of acquiring justified beliefs.⁴⁸

Within a post-foundationalist position we “... transcend the form of foundationalist fideism where our own reasoning and experiences never are challenged or contradicted, and the form of

non-foundationalism where a real need for interfaith contact and intersubjective dialogue never are seriously considered.”⁴⁹

Correspondence between Worldview and Epistemology

A classic understanding of Christianity, as found in traditional, conservative theology of the mainline denominations, based on the Bible, may be seen as consistent with an epistemology of some intermediate kind, accepting neither relativism nor a strict objectivism.⁵⁰ Christianity has from its very beginning been defended on the basis of general truth criteria, as demonstrated as early as in the New Testament. God is *Deus revelatus*, revealed in *the light of nature* and *the light of grace*, to apply a conception of Luther. At the same time God is far from fully revealed and comprehensible – he is *Deus absconditus*. In the lights of nature and grace, we do not see the whole of the picture of God and reality. Its full and true meaning has yet to be disclosed in *the light of glory*.⁵¹ As Sanders holds, “If we can grasp the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, that will be in the future or not at all. Here epistemology fuses with eschatology. In the meantime, we can only proceed confidently with our inquiry from where we stand.”⁵²

However, within the Christian theology today, not least within the theology of mission, a broad range of epistemological positions may be found, as the common classification of theology of religions in exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism indicates. The three kinds show some correspondence with the three groups of epistemologies. (1) A strict exclusivism parallels objectivism. (2) Pluralism is rather relativistic. An inclusivism emphasizing a common-core-and-goal is also rather relativistic. (3) A moderate exclusivism and a moderate inclusivism are the views most compatible with the post-foundationalist positions. It is this view, which I regard as the biblical position, I operate from in the following.

4 Dialogues with Objectivistic and Relativistic Dialogue Partners

The question to be dealt with now is: *How do the various kinds of epistemological positions in the various traditions and faiths shape the process and outcome of a post-foundationalist based Christianity's dialogues of the third kind with these faiths?* To sim-

plify the picture, I operate with the above presented three categories of (1) objectivism, (2) relativism, and (3) post-foundationalism.

In 4.1 and 4.2 I shall briefly point to some characteristics of dialogues involving objectivists and relativists. In section 5, I shall deal with dialogues between post-foundationalist partners.

4.1 Dialogue between a Christian

Post-Foundationalist Position and Objectivists

In a dialogue of discussions on beliefs (the third kind) between a Christian group of a post-foundationalist position and a group of another faith or worldview of an objectivistic stand, both parties will be willing to explain how one tries to integrate an understanding of the other's existence in one's own system of beliefs. However, when it comes to discussions of the credibility and plausibility of one's beliefs, the objectivists are hardly willing to discuss their beliefs as truths they should be liable to defend on the basis of truth criteria. They regard their basic beliefs as either (1) self-evidently true, and therefore not necessary to question, or, (2) within a fideist kind of objectivism they may understand them as divine truths which it is irrelevant or even blasphemous to question.

The first case is the problem in Christianity's relation to people who believe that science may explain all of reality and that propositions about anything transcendent are meaningless.

The second is the problem in, for example, dialogues with conservative Muslims. They hold the belief that the Quran is the word of Allah. Moreover, to question whether this belief is true or not, or how it can be justified, can only be regarded as disbelief or even blasphemy. The report on the LWF study program on Christian-Muslim relations from 1992 to 2002 concludes: "Muslims are less interested in dialogue as a theological process, but are more interested in it as an approach to cooperative action and problem solving."⁵³ The topics of the lectures included in the report demonstrate the same.

4.2 Dialogue between a Christian

Post-Foundationalist Position and Relativists

The next case is dialogue of the third kind between a Christian

group and a group of another faith or worldview of a relativistic position. In this constellation the relativistic party does not feel obliged to integrate any understanding of the Christian faith's existence in its own worldview. Moreover, the relativists hardly feel any need to challenge the Christian dialogue partner. Challenging questions from the Christian point of view may be received as intolerant and arrogant.

A basic problem is that the relativists regard the quest for truth criteria as irrelevant. At best, some internal coherence in one's own worldview may be seen as necessary. The quest for truth is reduced to a quest for the useful, and to the request that we all should accept the view that no view is exclusively true.⁵⁴ Thus, historical Christianity and relativism rest on "two radically different epistemological traditions".⁵⁵

A relativistic epistemology is a problem in dialogues with, for example, Buddhists and Hindus. As expressed in the summary report from the LWF study program "Christians and Buddhists in Conversation", conducted in the years from 1993 to 2000: "Christians engaging in such theological dialogue will be aware that the Buddhist vision of the ultimate truth ... is very different from the Christian view."⁵⁶ Moreover, the report shows that the kind of dialogue that actually was carried out, was of the second kind on my list – that on matters of common interests in the civil society for joint action. A real dialogue on the credibility of Christian versus Buddhist truth claims is, in fact, not a relevant matter for the rather relativistic Buddhist traditions.

Relativists are naturally more attracted to so-called "dialogue in spirituality", events of participation in one another's spiritual experiences such as meditation and prayers – the last kind of dialogue in my classification.

Thus, dialogues on matters of beliefs and doctrines with rightwing objectivists or leftwing relativists seem to be rather futile. The relativists, who are most eager to promote dialogue between the religions, render such a kind of dialogue pointless by their relativism. The objectivists are hardly interested in dialogue. For these reasons, in dialogues in which the non-Christian party presumes either an objectivistic or a relativistic epistemological position, one may rather focus on the basic problem of epistemology as the first matter to be dealt with.⁵⁷

5 Dialogue with a Partner of a Post-Foundationalist Position

A dialogue with a partner of a post-foundationalist position is the constellation that provides the most constructive discussion on matters of doctrines as universal truth claims. Both groups acknowledge that contradicting views on ultimate matters and commitments cannot be equally valid and good. Both parties also recognize that their positions ultimately rest on a set of central beliefs which one holds, and which one admits can be discussed on the basis of a set of common truth criteria. Therefore, such dialogue partners in principle grant one another the epistemic right to disagree while at the same time regarding one another as accountable for one's beliefs on the basis of truth criteria which both can recognize. A series of dialogues between Confucians and Christians, beginning with a conference in Hong Kong in 1988, seem to me to have been dominated by presuppositions of this kind.⁵⁸ I will now, as a final point, highlight some specific issues and suggestions for such a kind of dialogue.

5.1 Learning about One Another's Faiths and Eliminating Misunderstandings

In Christian mission we need to be engaged in dialogue in order to learn more about the local faiths and the people to whom we try to present the gospel. A lot of such information may be attained in the informal daily dialogue (of the first kind). However, more formal dialogues for this purpose with educated representatives of the other faiths would be of great value. In order to present the gospel as comprehensible within the frames of understanding of the local people, such knowledge is indispensable. Moreover, in such dialogues we get the opportunity to eliminate misunderstandings about the Christian faith. Thus, mutual understanding may be enhanced and misunderstandings eliminated.

5.2 Detecting Issues of Common Concern for the Civil Society

When learning to know one another's ethical concerns, particularly regarding social morality, one may detect central moral issues of common interests – issues for promoting cooperation, peace, and welfare for the local society. These are concerns

which can be allocated to their own kind of dialogue (the second kind on my list), and taken care of by dialogue representatives who are particularly qualified in the relevant matters.

5.3 Further Explications of Elements of One's Own Faith

A meeting with another faith in dialogue may expand one's horizon of understanding so as to make possible a further explication and elaboration of implicit aspects and nuances of the Christian message.⁵⁹ This may include aspects which Christian theology so far has left undeveloped simply because one has not yet been enabled to see them. Another fruit of an expanded horizon may be renewed accentuations on elements of the Christian faith which for some time have been ignored. Such potential products of dialogues, as can also be brought forth in efforts of contextualization, may enrich systematic theology in general in its further elaboration of Christian doctrines. Alister E. McGrath verbalizes the same thinking.⁶⁰ So does Lesslie Newbigin.⁶¹

5.4 A Faith-Challenging and Defending Discussion of Beliefs as a Search for Truth

As already claimed, a real and meaningful dialogue requires that both parties aim at presenting their own faith as universal truth claims, and yet as beliefs which are fallible in the meaning that they cannot be irrefutably proved, only made more or less plausible, and therefore are open to be challenged.⁶²

The parties will challenge one another, ponder on the challenges, and defend themselves. As Lesslie Newbigin holds, "The integrity and fruitfulness of the interfaith dialogue depends in the first place upon the extent to which the different participants take seriously the full reality of their own faiths as sources for the understanding of the totality of experience."⁶³ And this includes, as Volker Küster emphasizes, that we have to reflect over the place of other religions within the Christian thought system: "Without coming to terms with the existence of other religions in one's own thought system, one will not be able to dialogue."⁶⁴

The mutuality of challenge and defence means that, at least in principle, one has to be open to the possibility that one's faith as a whole fails in meeting sufficiently the standards of general truth indicators. This means that in dialogue we bring our faith to test

in new and often unprecedented ways.⁶⁵ However, the choice between faiths becomes real only when perplexities and incongruities of one's own tradition have become so overwhelming that pervasive doubt takes over, and, at the same time, an alternative belief system with a better credibility appears as an alternative. A conversion should then take place. If there is no choice appearing as better, one keeps one's faith, even in afflictions, like the apostle Peter reasoned: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" (John 6:68).

How can such a fallibilism be combined with a personal conviction and commitment which is at the heart of the Christian faith? As with the assurance of salvation, the assurance of the credibility of the Christian faith cannot be but an afflicted assurance. Such is the faith of the theologian of the cross. Kevin J. Vanhoozer therefore characterizes his virtue epistemology as an "epistemology of the cross".⁶⁶

6 Conclusion

There is no legitimate reason for the Christian church to withdraw from dialogue with other faiths, ideologies or even science. On the contrary, Peter exhorted his readers to "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (1 Pet 3:15-16). As Sanders maintains, "This exhortation confidently presupposes that there are reasons for that hope that are communicable and intelligible."⁶⁷

In dialogues with objectivists and relativists, one is, however, in need of comprehensive clarifications in matters of crucial epistemological differences before any fruitful discussion on questions of more specific doctrinal kind can be established. Such epistemological clarifications have certainly been a neglected issue.

Note

- ¹ See Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (New York: Orbis, 2005), 383-385. Cf. Viggo Mortensen's classification in five categories in *Zygon* No.1, (March 2002), 80-81. He adds dialogue of confrontation, for the purpose of uncovering hidden agendas. See also LWF Studies. *Explorations of Love and Wisdom: Christians and Buddhists in Conversation* (Geneva: LWF, 2002), 217-224. These four kinds are here elaborated on with regard to dialogue with Buddhists. Cf. also Jan-Martin Berentsen, Tormod Engelsen and Knud Jørgensen, *Missiologi i dag*, 2nd ed. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2004), 240-241.
- ² WCC. *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*. Geneva: WCC, 1979.
- ³ See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), 483-489.
- ⁴ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (New York: Orbis, 2005), 352-395. They claim that: "Mission today should first and foremost be characterized as an exercise of dialogue." (348).
- ⁵ See LWF, *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* (Geneva: LWF, 2004), 40-41.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ⁷ Jan-Martin Berentsen, Tormod Engelsen and Knud Jørgensen, eds., *Missiologi i dag*, 2nd ed. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2004), 240-241. The first edition was published in 1994.
- ⁸ Regarding this issue, see also I. Howard Marshall, "Inter-faith Dialogue in the New Testament," in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 13 (1989), no. 3, 196-215.
- ⁹ See his book *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 19-51: Chapter 1. Epistemological Foundations for Science and Theology. Chapter 2. The Missiological Implications of an Epistemological Shift. Chapter 1 was first published as early as in 1985, in *TSF Bulletin* 8.4 (March-April 1985): 5-10.
- ¹⁰ Cf. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 423-425.
- ¹¹ J. Andrew Kirk and Kelvin J. Vanhoozer (eds.), *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999).
- ¹² See *ibid.*, X.
- ¹³ See *ibid.*, X.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, XI. See also XIII: "In our view, it is essential that missiologists understand exactly what is being said about 'the crisis of knowledge' today and why so many people think these questions are crucial."
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, XVI.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, XVI.
- ¹⁷ Cf. this classification in Kurt Christensen, "Postfundamentisme: En foreløbig præsentation af an problemstilling og et løsningsforsøg," in *Ichthys*, no. 4, 34 (2007), 4-5.

- ¹⁸ See Robert Audi, gen.ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 253. Cf. also Mikael Stenmark, "Villkor för en godtagbar teologisk och filosofisk forskning," in *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 72 (1996): 146f.. And Kurt Christensen, "Postfundamentisme: En foreløbig præsentation af an problemstilling og et løsningsforsøg," in *Ichthys*, no. 4, 34 (2007): 5.
- ¹⁹ Cf. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 261.
- ²⁰ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Trial of Truth," in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 128.
- ²¹ See *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 133 and 236.
- ²² See Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 24-25. This view is especially associated with Hilary Putnam.
- ²³ See *ibid.*, 26-27.
- ²⁴ David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 82.
- ²⁵ See J. Andrew Kirk, "Religious Pluralism as an Epiphenomenon of Postmodern Perspectivism," in Viggo Mortensen, ed., *Theology and the Religions: A dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 439-442.
- ²⁶ Cf. article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of 1948. Cf. in particular the right to manifest one's faith.
- ²⁷ See W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 98-104.
- ²⁸ Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge. 2nd ed.* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).
- ²⁹ See Mikael Stenmark, *Rationality in Science, Religion, and Everyday Life: A Critical Evaluation of Four Models of Rationality* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).
- ³⁰ See Alvin Plantinga, *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).
- ³¹ See W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 129-133.
- ³² See J. Andrew Kirk, "Christian Mission and the epistemological Crisis in the West," in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 168.
- ³³ See Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993). Her view may be seen as a little closer to a moderate coherentism than the previous mentioned positions.
- ³⁴ See Andy F. Sanders, "Missiology, Epistemology, and Intratraditional Dialogue," in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 55-77. Sanders operates with "foundherentism" as his general epistemological stand, and names it "traditionalism" when applied as a "religious epistemology" (57).
- ³⁵ See F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pan-*

- enberg and the New Theological Rationality (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). See also Kurt Christensen, "Postfundamentisme: En foreløbig præsentation af en problemstilling og et løsningsforsøg," in *Ichthys*, no. 4, 34 (2007).
- ³⁶ See Kurt Christensen, "Postfundamentisme: En foreløbig præsentation af en problemstilling og et løsningsforsøg," in *Ichthys*, no. 4, 34 (2007): 10.
- ³⁷ Cf. "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).
- ³⁸ Cf. Andy F. Sanders, "Missiology, Epistemology, and Intratraditional Dialogue," in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 64: "Traditionalism holds that persons possess a fund of pretheoretical acceptances and anticipations which are not merely taken for granted, but in an important sense are relied upon in processes of belief formation, learning, inquiry, and action."
- ³⁹ Cf. Andy F. Sanders, "Missiology, Epistemology, and Intratraditional Dialogue," in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 63, see also 61. This point is the reason why Sanders name his position "fallibilist traditionalism".
- ⁴⁰ See Kurt Christensen, *Postmodernismens udfordring til kristendommens sandhed* (København: Credo Forlag, 2005), 326-337.
- ⁴¹ These are normally the only requirements of the traditional coherence theory of justification.
- ⁴² Cf. Luther's "inner clarity of Scripture". The "common sense" aspect of this element is of course not to be found in its content, which, actually, goes against common sense. The "common sense" feature in this respect is that inner experiences of existential kind should naturally be regarded as important for one's choice of faith.
- ⁴³ Andy F. Sanders, "Missiology, Epistemology, and Intratraditional Dialogue," in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 76-77.
- ⁴⁴ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Trial of Truth," in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 142: "Indeed, the Fourth Gospel as a whole is an extended testimony to God's truth claim that aims to persuade its readers to make the judgment for themselves that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31). The Fourth Gospel parades a host of witnesses on Jesus' behalf." Jesus' own miracles are presented as evidences (signs) to confirm his identity and mission. Moreover, Christian insight is gained through experiences obtained in obedient action (cf. John 7:17). Cf. also, e.g., Luke 1:1-4, and 1 Cor 15:6.
- ⁴⁵ See Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 23: As Kirk concludes, "The modest or critical realist believes that that we can adjust our ways of conceiving and speaking about the world under pressure from the world, from the standards of rational argument and from human experience."

- ⁴⁶ Andy F. Sanders, "Missiology, Epistemology, and Intratraditional Dialogue," in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 67.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 76.
- ⁴⁸ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Trial of Truth," in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 120. This is even more the case in W. Jay Wood's textbook on epistemology from 1998, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove; Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998).
- ⁴⁹ Kurt Christensen, "Postfundamentisme: En foreløbig præsentation af en problemstilling og et løsningsforsøg," in *Ichthys*, no. 4, 34 (2007): 9. My translation.
- ⁵⁰ See Kurt Christensen, "Postfundamentisme: En foreløbig præsentation af en problemstilling og et løsningsforsøg," in *Ichthys*, no. 4, 34 (2007): 10-11.
- ⁵¹ See Andy F. Sanders, "Missiology, Epistemology, and Intratraditional Dialogue," in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 76.
- ⁵² Ibid., 76-77.
- ⁵³ LWF Studies. *Dialogue and Beyond: Christians and Muslims Together on the Way* (Geneva: LWF, 2003), 30. The topics of the lectures included in the report demonstrate the same.
- ⁵⁴ See J. Andrew Kirk, "Religious Pluralism as an Epiphenomenon of Postmodern Perspectivism," in Viggo Mortensen, ed., *Theology and the Religions: A dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 442.
- ⁵⁵ J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission: Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), 141-142.
- ⁵⁶ LWF Studies. *Explorations of Love and Wisdom: Christians and Buddhists in Conversation* (Geneva: LWF, 2002), 219-220.
- ⁵⁷ Could it be possible to agree upon some common truth criteria as the basis for the dialogue? Which value can sense experiences be given, even personal experiences? Is it possible to acknowledge logical consistency as required? Can truth be regarded as one, and reality as real and not *maya* only – an illusion?
- ⁵⁸ Cf. particularly the lecture of Alan K.L. Chan, "Hermeneutics and Critical Theory: Toward Confucian Self-Understanding," in Peter K.H.Lee, ed. *Confucian-Christian Encounters in Historical and Contemporary Perspective* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 38-67. This book contains the lectures from this conference.
- ⁵⁹ See Arne Redse, *"By Grace Alone" in Contexts of "Self-Cultivation"* (Stavanger: Misjonshøgskolens Forlag, 2006), 89.
- ⁶⁰ See Alister E. McGrath, "The Church's Response to Pluralism," in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol 18, No 1, (1994): 9.
- ⁶¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 180.
- ⁶² See Andy F. Sanders, "Missiology, Epistemology, and Intratraditional Dialogue," in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 64-65. Cf also Jan-Martin Berentsen, "Den umulige dialogen – og den nødven-

dige,” in *Mission* 105 (1994) no. 3, 17: “No dialogue between religions can be disconnected from the truth question.” (My translation).

- ⁶³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev.ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 169.
- ⁶⁴ See Volker Küster, “Toward an Intercultural Theology,” in Viggo Mortensen, ed., *Theology and the Religions: A dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 182.
- ⁶⁵ Cf. LWF, *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* (Geneva: LWF, 2004), 52: “... partners in dialogue need to be open, in all objectivity and honesty, to the truth claim presented by the other, and with the clear possibility of changing sides if what is presented shakes the foundation of their faith.”
- ⁶⁶ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Trial of Truth,” in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 137.
- ⁶⁷ Andy F. Sanders, “Missiology, Epistemology, and Intratraditional Dialogue,” in J Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds.). *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 62.

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