

# Philosophical Reflections on Dialogue

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There probably has rarely been a time in recent memory when interreligious dialogue is more important than it is at the present time. The enthusiasm generated in 1991 with the fall of the Berlin Wall has given way to worldwide pessimism with the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York and the continuation of hostilities in many parts of the world. Moreover, many who thought that the religious had safely been relegated to the private sphere now recognize that religion is both at the heart of many conflicts in the world and a necessary part of their solution. On almost every continent there are conflicts in which real religious differences are at least one of the major causes: Muslim–Christian conflicts in Nigeria; Hindu–Muslim conflicts in India; Jewish–Muslim conflicts in the Middle East; perceived threats to Christianity in Europe; increased immigration of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus into North America. Growing globalization has led to further mixing of populations, especially in Western countries. These are just a few of the actual and potential areas of conflict among religious groups.

In this modest attempt to add something to the furtherance of interreligious dialogue in religious education in this worldwide context, my aim is to review philosophical discourse on dialogue and to relate it to interreligious dialogue and education. My focus is primarily on the nature of dialogue, its risks, limitations, and processes. I will draw selectively on the rather extensive tradition of Western philosophers who have written about dialogue as a method for arriving at knowledge and truth.

The philosophical tradition began with the dialogical method used by Socrates to encourage notable citizens of Athens to examine their own lives and the life of the city. Medieval Christendom witnessed the dialogical or dialectical method of the scholastics used in their disputations on debatable questions in Christian theology. Prominent among the scholastics was the most popular teacher of his time Peter Abelard, who came under papal condemnation for some of his theological view and

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teaching methods. In modern times interaction and dialogue based on the scientific method were at the heart of the democratic social, political, and educational philosophy of John Dewey. The Jewish existentialist philosopher Martin Buber lifted dialogue, which he termed “real meeting”, to the heights of human experience to include human relationships with natural objects, persons, and spiritual beings. Hans-Georg Gadamer built on Buber’s concepts and notions from the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger to present a hermeneutic approach to determine what it means to listen and be educated by the other. The critical philosopher Jurgen Habermas placed communicative discourse or dialogue at the center of his philosophical analysis of the deficiencies advanced by capitalist societies. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire developed a social, political, educational, and even religious philosophy with dialogue at its center. Finally, postmodern and postfoundational (poststructural) scholars including feminists have raised questions about neglected aspects of dialogue among contemporary philosophers, especially the danger of hegemonic domination.

Of course, other academic disciplines (psychology, social sciences, and literary studies) offer valuable contributions to the practice of interreligious dialogue. Yet the long and substantive tradition of philosophers on dialogue can make a significant contribution to our understanding of dialogue among persons and across cultures and religions. Philosophers can help us understand the various ways in which the word dialogue is used. They point out the different risks, dynamics, aims, and processes of dialogue. They examine the exaggerated claims that are often made for dialogue, criticizing them from liberal, conservative, or radical perspectives. Philosophers of education apply these ideas to the theory and practice of education.

This short chapter has a number of limitations. It does not take into account the historical situation within which these philosophical ideas on dialogue were formulated. Thus the treatment appears to be ahistorical. Socratic–Platonic dialogues were literary fictions developed within a society of free persons and slaves. Scholastic disputations were set with the universities of the medieval world and assumed the truth of the Christian faith. John Dewey proposed a dialogical approach to social and political life at the flourishing of the modern world committed to the values of science, technology, and industrialization. European societies in the mid-twentieth century were the contexts for the notions of dialogue found in Buber’s existentialism, Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and Habermas’ critical analysis of postindustrial capitalist societies. French postmodernist or poststructuralist thought as appropriated by scholars in the United States provides the basis for the postmodern and feminist critique of dialogue. Notwithstanding this limitation and the possible charge of essentialism that might be leveled against the following analysis, I believe it to be helpful to bring these ideas into discussions on interreligious dialogue.

Generally speaking, my focus in this chapter is on education only in an indirect manner. However, any discussion about dialogue is important for understanding education. Many educators, including religious educators, place dialogue at the heart of the educational process. All modes of education are dialogical even the lecture and presentation since the lecturer or instructor is at least involved in an implicit dialogue with students, which becomes explicit when students pose

questions or have directed discussions among themselves. Liberal progressive educators as well as educators committed to critical pedagogy strongly recommend dialogue as a primary mode of instruction. At the heart of all humanistic forms of education is the dialogical encounter. The political educator Paulo Freire, in recommending dialogical education, made the now well-known distinction between banking education and dialogical education.

Religious educators in the twentieth century advocated dialogical or interactionist methods of education as privileged ways to conduct religious education. Liberal Protestant educators from the beginning of the century were greatly influenced by the educational philosophy of John Dewey. Prominent theorists such as George Coe, Sophia Fahs, and others advocated an extensive and intensive use of dialogical methods. Among Catholic educators, beginning with the neo-progressive writings of Gabriel Moran (1970) to the traditioning method of Mary Boys (1989), and notably the shared praxis approach of Thomas Groome (1980), various forms of dialogue have been advocated. Jewish educators, such as Sara Lee (Boys & Lee, 1996), have long embraced dialogue as a privileged form of learning. One can also refer to the Buddhist *koan* as promoting though provoking dialogue.

## Personal Experiences of Dialogue

I begin in the concrete with the experiences that I have had over the years with inter-religious dialogue. My theological education did not prepare me for such ventures. I was educated in Roman Catholic institutions and was taught that since this was the one true religious faith I did not need to look elsewhere. So strict was this tradition in the 1940s and 1950s that we were forbidden to enter a non-Catholic church or even to join such quasi religious associations as the Young Men's Christian Association. In catechism and high school religion classes as well as in seminary halls the sole curriculum was the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. In seminary theology classes, which were taught through approved manuals, Protestant theologians were almost always the adversaries: Martin Luther, Philip Melancton, John Calvin, and Friedrich Schleiermacher (always pronounced in a disdainful manner), Adolph Harnack and Albert Ritschl.

Thus intellectually formed I was not ready for the winds of change that entered the church during the pontificate of John XXIII, the theological and pastoral changes of Second Vatican Council and the beginnings of Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement. Theological language became more conciliatory and Catholics started to meet with Protestants in Living Room Dialogues, in which I participated as a young priest. The council documents on other Christian churches, non-Christian religions and religious freedom introduced a whole new agenda into the church. I earnestly embraced and promoted all of the movements begun around this time: ecumenical, liturgical, catechetical, and theological. I was a member of the diocesan commission on ecumenism and was honored to participate in many ecumenical activities, once preaching on the theme "A Time to Rend and a Time to Sew"

before gathered Roman Catholic and Episcopal clergy in an Episcopal Cathedral in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Catholic life began to embrace ecumenical commissions, sharing of pulpits and prayer services for Christian unity. Interreligious dialogue with Jews was inaugurated with the publication of the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*. Many colleges and universities set up centers for promoting ecumenical relationships.

I will recount three significant instances of interreligious dialogues in which I was engaged. For about 3 years in the 1960s I participated in dialogues among Roman Catholic priests and Lutheran pastors. These dialogues were instrumental in changing a number of my theological attitudes and even beliefs. I began to read Protestant theologians: Martin Luther, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, Martin Marty and Robert MacAfee Brown. I became close friends with pastors who were married and had children. These dialogues gradually changed my views on the value of the word as compared to sacrament, biblical authority as contrasted to traditional and ecclesiastical authority. I began to accept the Lutheran attitude toward married clergy and the legitimacy of divorce in some cases. A Sunday dinner with a Lutheran pastor and his family gave me a premonition that one day I too would be married and have a family. One of the risks of dialogue is that one might have to consider making fundamental life changes.

A second experience of interreligious dialogue occurred when I was teaching world religions in a Catholic high school. A rabbi and I brought our young people together to dialogue about their respective faiths. What the Catholic students and I learned was the careful and scholarly approach that the young Jewish students took to their study of the Hebrew Scriptures. We learned that Judaism was not an old religion but a present and vibrant faith. Jewish students knew much more about the Christian faith than the Catholic students knew about Judaism. An abiding lesson was that study is a religious activity. These lessons and others were confirmed a few years later when I moderated a study retreat for Catholic and Jewish teachers and, many years later, a 2-day conference that I gave to Jewish adult educators. I experienced my first Seder in the home of a rabbi where I was welcomed as the long-awaited Elijah. A memorable impression was that one of the chief festivals in the Jewish religion took place at a family celebration. I saw as if for the first time the continuity that exists between the Jewish and Christian faiths.

I have participated in only one dialogue in which Muslims were involved. The Center for Christian Jewish Understanding at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, sponsored a symposium on "What we would like the other to teach about our views on moral teaching." I gave the talk on Christian Morality, with the other talks being given by a Jewish and a Muslim scholar. The exchange was lively and the proceedings became part of a book on the broader topic of exchange of views among Christians, Jews, and Muslims (Coppola, 2006).

Other dialogues with Muslims have been informal dialogues in classes and in conversations after classes. The presence of one student led me to purchase the Koran to make sure that I included readings from it in all of the sessions of my 5-week course on preparing politically sensitive and active religious leaders in New York's South Bronx. Unfortunately, I never met his imam to whom he recounted

all that happened in the class. A Turkish Muslim in a course on Religion, Church and Society forced all of us, especially Nigerian priests, to break down some of the caricatures we had of Muslims and their faith.

In recent years at Fordham University an increasing number of Protestant and Orthodox students take our courses. These students have compelled my colleagues and me to take seriously Protestant scholarship and attitudes. In a significant way the presence of the “other” has transformed my teaching to such a degree that at times Catholic students are critical of the “Protestant” orientation of many classes. Balance in this area is rather difficult to achieve.

## Philosophical Reflections on Dialogue

### *Socratic and Platonic Dialogues*

It is fruitful to examine dialogue in the history of philosophy. First of all, dialogue can be a risky and dangerous activity. The annoyance that Socrates caused with his dialogical method was no doubt one of the causes of his death. As portrayed by his disciple Plato, Socrates used questioning dialogue to examine all aspects of Athenian life. In the Plato’s *Apologia*, an account of Socrates’ trial on impiety to the gods and corruption of Athenian youth, Socrates presents himself as knowing nothing, even though the Delphic oracle in its usual genre of riddles language stated that no one is wiser than Socrates.

In searching for the meaning of the riddle about his great wisdom, Socrates questioned those thought to be wise and found that a general did not know what courage was and a religious fanatic did not know the meaning of piety. Even though his embarrassing of citizens made Socrates unpopular, he thought that in doing this he was following the command of his *daimon* to search for wisdom by engaging in dialogue with others, being a gadfly. Through questioning he showed that others were not wise, contrary to what they thought, and that he was wiser at least because he knew that he was not wise. Socrates conceded that though many were wise in knowing particular skills, they were not wise in what was really important. He, Socrates, was better off since while he did not have their knowledge of particular skills, he did not have their ignorance of truly important things. Thus he came to the conclusion that the meaning of the oracle is that human wisdom counts for little; he, Socrates, is wise who admits his own ignorance.

For Socrates the truly important things to know were the real meaning of such ethical concepts as courage, piety, moderation, justice, and love. Here is where Plato appears to interject some of his own views. Socrates could not find these notions because he was looking in the wrong places; these are found in the world of the “forms”. This introduces us to another philosophical lesson about dialogue, to be treated below.

The Socratic dialogues also warn us about the difficulty in clarifying language used in dialogue. Religious words like all other language have historical and cultural

contexts. They often mean different things to members of different faiths. Words like God, faith, salvation, and morality have long histories. This makes all dialogue difficult. Though there are some common beliefs among religious groups, these are often expressed through different words.

I have alluded to another risk of dialogue found in Plato's dialogues, that of *dogmatism*. Dialogue can be a fiction in which dogmatic views are propounded under the guise of an honest search for truth. In the *Republic*, the classic dialogue from Plato's middle period, Plato through his mouthpiece Socrates propounds all the right answers on what the just society is and what type of education this society should foster. Through the Allegory of the Cave Plato teaches that a few philosophers can arrive at what are the true "forms" or essences and what are the forms that human existence should take. Most of the people trapped in a cave see only shadows of these forms. They think that in knowing these shadows of reality they really know things as they are but they are mistaken, as his mouthpiece Socrates proves through long and often tedious dialogues. The ascent to true knowledge is a long and arduous one to be accomplished only by the few.

Many critics from John Dewey (1916) to Karl Popper (2006) have pointed out the undemocratic and even totalitarian conception of society that this dialogue contains. Dewey attributed this to Plato's limited view of individuals and possible social arrangements as well as lack of appreciation of the uniqueness of individuals (1916, pp. 88–91). Although some philosophers have attempted to defend Plato against the charge of dogmatism, many others contend that it is truly present in his dialogues (Vlastos, 1991).

The attempt to inculcate dogmatic beliefs would ultimately seem to make interreligious dialogue a fruitless or even impossible venture. Can Christians with their firm beliefs in the divinity of Christ and the Trinity as fundamental to their faith truly engage in dialogue with Jews, Buddhists, and Muslims? Can theists truly engage in interreligious dialogue with nontheists? Of course, dialogue is possible on a wide range of religious issues that the groups share in common. There are also many good reasons for dialogue among religious individuals or groups besides ultimate agreement. But if one sets as the ultimate goal of dialogue, essential agreement, then the matter is much more difficult. What could possibly be the ultimate point of dialogue when it is known that ultimately beliefs held dogmatically will bring an end to any possibility of real agreement?

Two philosophers of religion have dealt with this issue. John Hick (1980, 1985) has argued that there is a Reality that all religions accept. It appears as a person in some religions and as impersonal in other religions. For him this ultimate reality is the basis upon which all interreligious dialogue can take place. Hick deals with the Christian "exclusivist doctrines" of the Incarnation and the Trinity by interpreting them as myths, thus removing them as the most serious obstacles to Christian involvement in interreligious dialogue.

Most Christians do not accept this reinterpretation of basic Christian doctrines. The French philosopher Simone Weil provided another way of interpreting the Incarnation that might render interreligious dialogue ultimately possible for

Christians. In her “A letter to a priest” written in 1982, Weil offered a strict interpretation of the reality of the Incarnation. Through her study of Greek religions she came to the conclusion that all religions were empowered by the Christ event even before it took place. For many her argument appears the same as Karl Rahner’s interpretation of anonymous or crypto Christians. Weil universalized the Christ event by focusing on three aspects of the Incarnation. It points to the universalization of suffering by presenting a suffering God. It urges believers to take material life seriously. Third, it urges them to take the material considerations of religious life seriously (Weil, as cited in Springsted, 1992, pp. 30–31).

### *Scholastic Disputation and Dialogue*

Dialogue is especially risky and dangerous in theology and religion. This is illustrated by the trials and tribulations of Peter Abelard (1070–1142), one of the great medieval scholastic philosopher-theologians. Abelard introduced the dialectic or dialogic method into philosophical discourse on theological issues, especially the doctrine of the Trinity. In his *Sic et Non*, which he began by stating that “by doubting we come to inquiry and by inquiry we perceive the truth” he presented contradictory opinions on matters of Christian faith. These made up the content and method of his teaching. This scholastic method of dealing with disputed questions through the structured *disputatio* allowed its more skilled practitioners to save the appearances of the ancient authorities while, at the same time, putting forward original solutions of their own whenever the sources of Christian faith, the Bible and the writings of the early Church fathers required further explication, which was extremely often (Clanchy, 1997, p. 34).

Abelard, anticipating by centuries the far-ranging probing of the Enlightenment philosophers, insisted on the priority of understanding over faith, reversing the axiom of Anselm of Canterbury: “I believe so that I may understand.” It was Abelard’s view that nothing should be believed unless it is first understood and that it was of no use for anyone to tell others something which neither he nor those he taught could grasp with the intellect. He was a Socratic teacher in the classroom. Faith for him was a best estimate.

The essence of the scholastic method of education was not to explicate spiritually the Scriptures line by line, as monks did in their sermons and commentaries, but to pose wide-ranging questions and then answer them from logical principles as if for the first time. The most famous scholastic question was Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo?*: Why did God wish to redeem mankind by becoming incarnate, when it could have been done by any prophet or angel?

Abelard’s use of this dialectical method, especially on the doctrine of the Trinity, and the results to which it led was one of the reasons for his condemnation by the pope of the time who heeded the call of the monk Bernard of Clairvaux calling for this action. Bernard, rejecting the scholastic dialectical or dialogical method in his attack on Abelard, wrote to the pope:

Away, away with any idea that the Christian faith should have its limits in the estimates of those academics who doubt everything and know nothing. I go secure in the sentence of the Master of the Gentiles, and I truly know that I shall not be confounded. (As cited in Clanchy, 1997, p. 35)

To Abelard he wrote “You whisper to me that faith is an estimate and you mutter about ambiguity to me, as though nothing were certain” (p. 35).

The dialectical scholastic method has also been charged with dogmatism. Those who make this charge contend that while the method seemed to foster inquiry and discovery, since it ultimately depends on truths found in the literature of scriptures, it accepted their authority and not that of reason. Truths are known before a true effort to discover them. If there was freedom of discussion and inquiry, it was in areas that were not central to Christian faith, such as the number of angels on a pin.

John Dewey (1916, pp. 280–281) was particularly critical of the scholastic dialectical method in education. He considered it merely an effective way to organize and present an authoritative body of truths. In Dewey’s view while the method defined, expounded, and interpreted received doctrine, it did not lead to inquiry, discovery, and invention. While this may be true of later scholastic, it certainly was not true of Abelard who contended that all Christian doctrines could be proven by rational argumentation. One only has to examine the range of issues debated and argued at the medieval universities to see the freedom that this method allowed. The fact that the scholastics were severely criticized by traditional monastic educators like Bernard and were often condemned by popes and councils attests to the freedom of inquiry that this dialogical method allowed. Many debates on doctrinal issues took place in public places. Martin Luther’s challenge to debate publicly 95 theses must be seen in this scholastic context, even though he was not sympathetic to the scholastic methods.

Whether charges of dogmatism against Plato and the medieval scholastics are true or not is not particularly germane to this discussion. The point is that it is possible that dogmatism can intrude into dialogue. This is especially the case when the ultimate authority for religious truth lies in the authority of particular writings, traditions, or teaching authorities to which is ascribed divine assistance, whether infallibly or not. This problem would seem to affect all religions, except perhaps those that base their fundamental beliefs solely on a rational basis such as natural or rational religion of John Locke and deists. People within dogmatic traditions can enter dialogue but not in such a way that they are truly open to a search for truth, which they already have in their professions of faith.

### ***Scientific Dialogue in a Democratic Society: Pragmatism and Process Philosophy***

In Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy the goal of individuals and societies was growth, which was to be achieved through freedom, creativity, interaction, and dialogue. His conviction was that democracy as he defined it was the way of life that best promotes



this growth. All social groups, and here we can include religions, grow through interaction and communication with other social groups. Dewey (1954) argues that a society whose members and groups converse in diverse ways is a healthy society:

The first actuality is accomplished in face-to-face relationships by means of direct give and take. Logic in its fulfillment recurs to the primitive sense of the word: dialogue. Ideas which are not communicated, shared, and reborn in expression are but soliloquy, and soliloquy is both broken and imperfect thought. (p. 371)

Though he rarely uses the word, the concept of dialogue is at the heart of Dewey's epistemology, social and political philosophy, and educational theory. For him, science most adequately describes how we think and arrive at knowledge. To think and to know is to observe, experiment, inquire, discuss, discover, and invent. We examine what is happening in our experiences, develop hypotheses or theories, gather and assess the evidence, draw conclusions, and subject these conclusions to additional questions. There is no end to the process; as many as want can participate in the process. Progress comes by overturning what has been thought and concluded in the past.

Dewey applied this mode of dialogical thinking to his understanding of the social and political bases of society. For him there were no readymade ideal societies that are known only to the few or that are found described in the literature the past. There is no ideal republic, no ideal Christendom. A society of people, a democratic society, is fashioned first of all by examining individual and social experience in their fullness. Building a democratic society is a grand experiment in which all can be involved and in which there is a need for continuing dialogue, conversation, and discussion.

Education according to Dewey is also interactive and thus dialogical. Like science, it begins with experience but aims at the reconstruction of experience which leads to further reconstruction of that experience. There is really no end or aim to education except growth. There are no fixed ideas but only a fixed method, the scientific method. All are invited to participate in the dialogue, conversation, or reconstruction.

Dewey's ideas have been carried into the debate about the nature of a liberal democratic society by Richard Rorty. For him, "A liberal society is one whose ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than force, by reform rather than revolution, by the free and open encounters of present linguistic and other practices with suggestions for new practices" (Rorty, 1989, p. 60). A free society is one in which people of conscience and morality deliberate and use language not as God given but as contingent upon the situations that are faced. For Rorty, the liberal democratic society depends on arriving at truths not defined as correspondence with reality but "with what comes to be believed in the course of free and open encounters" (p. 68).

It would appear on first hearing that this form of dialogue as such is off limits or of limited value in interreligious dialogue since religions accept fixed ideas found in sacred literature and history, all of which are authorities to be accepted. Dewey can, of course, be enlisted for this point of view. He abandoned his Christian faith and in *A Common Faith* (1974) described religious faith as the achievement of the

fullness of humanity. However, there is a philosophical system of thought that has accepted the challenge of reinterpreting religious beliefs in a way that is consonant with scientific thinking. This is found in the process philosophy and theology of A. Whitehead (1996/1926).

Whitehead was a mathematician and a physicist who came to religious faith by a desire to investigate objectively and accurately a fuller explanation of the world. He employed the scientific method of reasoning in his religious speculations: formulating hypotheses, testing, and modifying them. His religious system of thought has been used by many Christian theologians to present a view of God and the world that is consonant with scientific thought. His ideas have also been influential for persons involved in interreligious dialogue between adherents to the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and Eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism).

John B. Cobb (2002) is a notable scholar of Whitehead who has applied the latter's ideas in attempts to make connections between Abrahamic faiths and Eastern religions. Dialogue with Buddhism has been a special interest of his. He has often pointed to the fact that many Catholics in Japan consider themselves both Christian and Buddhist. He finds in Whitehead's philosophy reasons for this possibility. Both reject the concept of substance and permanence, asserting the reality of change in persons and the universe.

Obviously, the dialogue between Buddhists and believers in God must deal with the rejection of a personal God by Buddhism. But Cobb contends that Buddhists might accept the reality of God as conceived by Whitehead since this God is not substance, as in most Western theology, but an all-inclusive instance of "dependent origination", an accepted Buddhist concept, with some dependence on creatures. Cobb (2002) finds in some interpretations of Buddhism a movement in the direction of such a God. He contends "a Whiteheadian theist sides with some forms of Buddhism against others. My only claim is that there is nothing in Whiteheadian theism that is fundamentally in conflict with the deepest and most widely accepted Buddhist insights" (p. 6).

### ***Dialogue and Listening: Buber and Gadamer***

A philosopher of dialogue in recent memory was Martin Buber who described the various kinds of relationships that persons enter into. There are two fundamental relationships: *I-Thou* and *I-It*. We can enter into relationships with the world of persons and the world of discrete objects (Buber, 1923, p. 4). Humans can have an *I-Thou* relationship with nature, and also with people and spiritual beings. A real dialogue, however, can take place only in relationships among persons. Though Buber recognized that "all real living is meeting", he also spoke of the indispensability of the *I-It* relationships, which is the ordinary mode of existence. The existence of this relationship has the potential to awaken us to the possibility of moving to *I-Thou* relationships.

Though I do not believe that I have achieved the depth of an *I–Thou* relationship in my limited experience of interreligious dialogue, I came close with Pastor Robert Schultz. His acceptance of a call to minister in another country cut short the development of our relationship. I am sure that others have had deeper experiences than I have had. Buber reminds us that in all dialogues it is people meeting people, whether this be at highly academic and formal levels or in more informal encounters. There always exists this potential for deepening of relationships. I believe that Buber offers a goal of trying to achieve at least the beginnings of friendship in interreligious dialogical relationships.

The difficult task during dialogue is to really listen to others. Gadamer (1960) offered an excellent analysis of listening in his work, *Truth and Tradition*, which has great relevance for interreligious dialogue. He was dependent in this work both on Martin Heidegger and Martin Buber. For Gadamer, people who engage in dialogue face a world of strangeness and familiarity; they share some things with others but must also listen to strange and different things. When we meet others we engage as persons shaped by our traditions, beliefs, and prejudgments, which include cultural, religious, and political experiences. We are able to make sense of others only if we consider them as persons to whom we relate and attempt to understand their actions on the basis of our experiences.

According to Gadamer, we should listen to others with the understanding that we can understand them despite our prejudgments. We should attempt to understand others on their own terms, trying to bracket our own beliefs and prejudgments. However, we must acknowledge that our situatedness makes it difficult for us to fully understand others. Gadamer explains the highest form of listening in Buberian language:

To experience the Thou truly as a Thou, i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. . . . Belonging together always means being able to listen to one another. When two people understand each other, this does not mean that one person “understands” the other. (1960, p. 361)

Reflecting on Gadamer’s analysis of the difficulty of engaging in sympathetic listening, one wonders why one would ever want to take these risks, especially when one is satisfied with one’s own situation. From a personal perspective, we should listen to others since we live in a greatly changing world where it may be necessary for us to listen, understand, and learn from others. At other times we have no choice but to listen to others since developments within our own lives and institutions may require us to listen to others. Through listening and dialoguing with others, we may actually learn more about ourselves, our traditions, and our religious faith. In fact, through dialogue we often learn what we truly believe. Furthermore, we at times listen to others when we find that our own life stories and trajectories do not seem rich enough for the lives we want to live. Critical self-reflection or group reflection may bring about the changes needed. It is a common experience that listening to others broadens our own horizons and perspectives. While those who are satisfied with what they are and with what their traditions and institutions convey may

find no reason to engage in sympathetic listening, those who seek a richer life for themselves or their institutions should be willing to take the risks.

This discussion on dialogue is written primarily from a personal perspective. There are to be sure many political and social reasons for forms of dialogue including interreligious dialogue. History shows us how religious differences have led to killings, wars, conflicts, and the loss of many lives. To do anything to avoid this is reason enough for entering dialogue. I have taken the vantage point of the individual more in consideration in this chapter.

### *Dialogue as Communicative Action*

Jürgen Habermas has offered an influential interpretation of mutual understanding or dialogue in the tradition of the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory. He modified certain concepts of earlier formulations by Marcuse, Horkheimer, and others, criticizing the notion of instrumental reason and presenting a critical theory of democracy in which communicative action through public debate and discussion is essential, though he did not deny the importance of experts.

In his highly influential *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas (1968) developed an emancipatory theory of society in which he distinguished three cognitive interests: instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory. He argued for the notion that critical reason must go beyond mere negation of particular societal arrangements and processes to include a process of understanding among persons which highlights critical reflection on how selves and society are formed. Such reflection, in his view, would be emancipatory in freeing individuals and societies from prevailing forms of dominating control and reigning false ideologies.

In *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), a work most relevant to a critical understanding of dialogue, we find a more systematic and mature theory of society. Habermas here distinguished between two basic forms of social action: instrumental and communicative. The first is action oriented toward accomplishing a concrete practical goal. The second is action oriented toward mutual understanding.

Habermas contends that in modern societies dialogue among individuals has often been replaced by imposition of laws and institutions from above without sufficient debate and discussion. Economic and political decisions are made by experts without adequate public discussion. The imperatives of a system have replaced human debate and dialogue. Modern democracies and capitalist systems suffer from a lack of communication among publics.

In his later work Habermas, in developing a discourse ethics, was critical of Kantian ethics. He criticized Kant for proposing an ethic that applies only to the individuals and not to broad social units. Kant asked us to act in such a way that what we do can become a universal norm. Habermas' discourse ethics demands that we also take an intersubjective and social perspective. Only those norms are actually valid in his view which could be accepted by all who are involved in the discourse and dialogue.

Many critics, however, see Habermas' moral and political theory as a return to a Kantian moral theory. It can be viewed as an attempt to fuse Kantian insights into Hegelian notions of concrete intersubjectivity. In addition, poststructuralists reject the idea of an inclusive intersubjective foundation for ethics, politics, and law. For Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), for example, law is a closed system instituted through violence. Genuine intersubjectivity is rooted, in contrast, in care and compassion for the other, which is always beyond law and justice. On this reading, Habermas replays the earlier notion of a unified social subject. Habermas' (1984) use of systems theory in *Theory of Communicative Action* has also been criticized by interpretive social theorists who believe that Habermas' theory of society is inconsistent with his general commitment to interpretive and critical social science.

### ***Postmodern Rejection of Dialogue Across Differences***

Postmodern thought has challenged accepted assumptions in philosophy as well as in many other academic disciplines. Postmodern educators have extended their criticisms to dialogue across differences especially where there are potential differences in power. Some consider such dialogue not only not worthwhile but actually impossible. The postmodern emphasis on differences is such that it is contended that many voices, perspectives, and opinions should be allowed to be expressed without any attempt to reconcile them or to bring them into any consistent account. Attempts to do this will almost always entail domination of some groups by others.

This is not the place to review the many conflicting themes of postmodern thought. Suffice to state that at least three themes dominate this thought: the rejection of absolutes or metanarratives in social, political, economic, and moral theory; the belief that all political and social discourse is suffused with domination and power; and the celebration of differences in race, gender, culture, and religion as well as in other areas of life.

Many postmodernist educators contend that dialogue across differences is impossible because understanding among people with differences is not possible and also because discourses across differences necessarily entails that individuals or groups will impose their values and beliefs on others. Postmodern critics contend that dialogue is often not sufficiently sensitive to the various conditions of differences that exist among groups. It also at times ignores the serious conflicts and historical incidents of oppression that groups have experienced at the hands of others. Some postmodern critics reject the view that such discourse can be reasonable and that alternative points of view will not be treated fairly. Dialogue in a society is impossible since relations between people in different groups such as races, genders, cultures, and religions are unjust (Ellsworth, 1989).

This postmodern approach has been subjected to criticism for its inconsistencies in seeming to reject dialogue but also accept it in a modified form. Also, differences can be respected and maintained in dialogue for practical reasons: so that people

can exist in a peaceful manner in which their lives are enriched and invigorated. As Burbules and Rice (1991) have noted:

There is no reason to assume that dialogue across differences involves either eliminating those differences or imposing one group's views on others; dialogue that leads to understanding, cooperation, and accommodation can sustain differences within a broader compact of toleration and respect. (p. 402)

Furthermore, all differences imply that there is still some sameness among groups, difference is a relative term, and all groups can be divided into subgroups, with dialogue being possible with at least one of the subgroups as is often the case.

The value of examining postmodern thought on education is that it acts as a critique of other philosophical approaches to dialogue and education (Elias & Merriam, 2005, chap. 8). Most commentators do not feel, however, that it makes a significant contribution to dealing with the many issues that it raises. It is powerfully deconstructive but not equally reconstructive.

## Conclusions for Interreligious Dialogue

First of all, interreligious dialogue is important for a number of reasons. All dialogue has the potential of strengthening the identity of those who engage in it, as argued by Dewey in his description of the democratic society. Through dialogue we come to a clearer understanding of our own beliefs, values, and attitudes. We also recognize that we belong to multiple subgroups with different interests. While Dewey discussed dialogue within the context of one country, his ideas are equally applicable on a global level. Second, participants in dialogue are enriched by taking into consideration the somewhat different perspectives that others have of them and being challenged into incorporating those perspectives into their own or their group's understanding. Third, dialogue across religious differences may foster our capacities to listen to others with both patience and tolerance. It can make us less dogmatic about our own prejudices. These outcomes, of course, are not guaranteed but they certainly make the practice of dialogue desirable for individuals and groups.

It is important to recognize that dialogue is not always possible, and also, unfortunately, it can lead to more harm than good. A realistic caution has been voiced by Burbules and Rice (1991): "There are contexts of hostility, resentment, or domination in which only further harm can be done by attempts to communicate across conflicts and gulfs of misunderstanding" (p. 408). Notwithstanding this dialogue should still be pursued to attempt to reconcile differences and achieve common meanings and understandings as proposed by Freire, Gadamer, Habermas and many others. Another goal of dialogue, no less important, is to foster respect and tolerance across differences.

Participants in interreligious dialogue might benefit by reflection on the spectrum of results that might be achieved through dialogue:

- (a) agreement and consensus, identifying beliefs or values all parties can agree to;
- (b) not agreement, but a common understanding in which the parties do not agree, but establish common meanings in which to discuss their differences;
- (c) not a common understanding, but an understanding of differences in which the parties do not entirely bridge their differences, but through analogies of experiences or other indirect translations can understand, at least in part, each other's positions;
- (d) little understanding, but a respect across differences, in which the parties do not fully understand one another, but by each seeing that the other has a thoughtful, conscientious position, they can come to appreciate and respect even positions they disagree with; and
- (e) irreconcilable and incommensurable differences (Burbules & Rice, 1991, p. 409).

This spectrum of possible results of dialogue is a realistic appraisal of possibilities. They ring true to the experience we have as individuals in our relationships with others and the experiences we have had in groups. There are enough good possibilities to warrant taking a pragmatic approach to all dialogue opportunities.

Like all other human activities the practice of dialogue requires what Burbules and Rice (1991) call communicative virtues. They identify these virtues as:

tolerance, patience, respect for differences, a willingness to listen, the inclination to admit that one may be mistaken, the ability to reinterpret or translate one's own concerns in a way that makes them comprehensible to others, the self-imposition of restraint in order that others may have a turn to speak, and the disposition to express one's self honestly and sincerely. (p. 411)

The educational task is to aid in the development of these virtues within families, schools, and religious bodies. If these virtues are present in the life of adults, they may well develop in children and young people. Like all virtues, they are achieved through imitation and practice. The one virtue that may be most difficult for those in interreligious dialogue to act on is to admit that one or one's group may be mistaken. An honest study of the history of all religious bodies reveals, however, that all have been mistaken at some times in their history. This awareness should make all groups and individuals open to participate in interreligious dialogue. It should also alert educators to teach in such a way that they prepare and encourage students to live a life that is open to dialogue with the other.

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