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To cite this article: Ingeborg Gabriel (2017) All Life Is Encounter: Reflections on Interreligious Dialogue and Concrete Initiatives, Religious Education, 112:4, 317-322, DOI: 10.1080/00344087.2017.1325096

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2017.1325096

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Published online: 28 Jul 2017.

Article views: 430

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ALL LIFE IS ENCOUNTER: REFLECTIONS ON INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND CONCRETE INITIATIVES

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THE PRESENT SITUATION

The title of this article has been taken from the book *I and Thou* of the German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1923). He formulated it as a creed in a world dominated by what he called “I–It” relationships (i.e., relations with objects rather than with human subjects). The digital revolution of the past decades has made this general tendency of the modern world even more prominent. Through technical means (the Internet, etc.) our planet has become highly interconnected as well as interdependent, but the human dimension often does not follow suit. So we are in fact confronted with a paradoxical situation. Because of technical devices our minds become more and more geared toward an instrumental way of thinking: things function if only we know how to press the right button. This obviously does not work with humans. Here interconnectedness necessarily means or at least should mean personal encounters and dialogue that demand respect of the other and his or her freedom. Most people on the planet being religious, dialogue more often than not thereby means interreligious dialogue. What has been an endeavor of specialists some thirty years ago, in the present has gained considerable social as well as political importance. This is the more so since in a globalized world societies are becoming increasingly pluralistic, multiethnic, and multireligious due to migration. At the same time, however, there exists a growing longing of people for social homogeneity. It, therefore, is not at all surprising that on the one hand there are great expectations connected with interreligious dialogue, including the hope that it can contribute to peace and understanding both nationally and internationally. At the same time there are also serious doubts and there is even some (premature) disappointment as to whether interreligious dialogue can really live up to these high expectations it raises. There are, moreover, voices in all religions that warn against syncretism and, more importantly, which ask what use there is in bringing together those who are already well meaning, whereas fierce religionists and fanatics cannot be reached anyway. I will come back to these fundamental

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1 For this reason Pope Francis’s first YouTube message was on interreligious dialogue (“The Pope Video—Inter-Religious Dialogue” 2016).

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questions after some reflections on interreligious dialogue and the initiatives I participated in and co-founded.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUES, THEIR CONSEQUENCES AND IMPORTANCE

Dialogue by definition means an encounter between persons dia-logou—“through the word.” Thus, it is more than an exchange of information, although facts are part of it. But the personal dimension definitely stands in the foreground. It also is no dialogue in the true sense of the word if the aim is purely strategic or if it intends to manipulate the other. This type of fake communication, which can increasingly be observed in politics and society in general, constitutes a violation of the freedom and of the dignity of human beings. In this sense it can also be said that violence in all its forms constitutes the exact opposite of dialogue. With regard to dialogical personal encounters, experience shows that this relational dimension becomes the more intense the more the issues talked about are of existential importance to the persons involved. When we speak about what really matters to us, this creates inner personal bonds with others. This holds particularly true for discussions on religious and ethical topics, which are of profound concern to every person, touching his/her innermost being and identity. Here also lies a risk, since such issues not only create inner bonds but they can, obviously, also create deep divisions and conflicts between people—as any look at the present world shows. Such conflicts can only be avoided by strengthening mutual respect based on the fundamental insight that as contingent and limited human beings we are always searching for the truth but never own and possess it in an essentialist way. Moreover it has to be taken into account that dialogue is characterized by an inherent tension: it requires on firm and reflected identities of those who participate in it. Religious convictions are not to be left behind but are the basis of an interreligious dialogue. Thus, identity and convictions are not to be left behind, but are part of dialogue and may even be deepened and intensified through it. This is what makes for its dynamism and fruitfulness. On the other hand, this identity has to be open toward learning from the other, based on the fundamental insight that our knowledge can never be complete or absolute in a contingent and imperfect world. The recognition of this hermeneutical principle constitutes the precondition for gaining new insights through encounters, be they interreligious or not, which are never only cognitive but are also existential. As Plato has shown in his dialogues, the search for truth through reason (in Greek logos) and the process of dia-logēin can and indeed does transform humans. He even attributes a sort of numinous quality to it because when talking with others often and intensively, a light may appear in the soul that guides us to greater understanding. This perfectly describes the experience of dialogue at its best, its creative quality as well as its critical dimension.

My involvement in interreligious dialogue since the 1980s has taught me that it is helpful to distinguish between three types of interreligious dialogue.

First, there is the so-called dialogue of life. In today's multireligious societies, interreligious encounters take place in many settings. They powerfully shape our views of the other, in a positive or a negative way. If successful, such encounters carry a dou-
ble benefit: They create personal bonds, and they shape our view of the other's religion and/or nation. This religion and nation is then no longer a religion or nation of strangers, but of friends, for whom we feel a sympathy that consequently will also color our view of the collective to which he or she belongs. In this way such encounters and dialogues can destroy clichés and prejudices, or simply help to overcome ignorance and create mutual sympathy not only for an individual but also for the group he or she represents and lead to practical cooperation in many fields. It can, however, also lead to the opposite. This makes for the high degree of responsibility we carry when meeting with persons from other cultures and religions.

The dialogue of life lies at the basis of two other forms of interreligious dialogue, the dialogue on creed and the dialogue on ethics. It is helpful to distinguish between them since they have specific and indeed different aims. Since this reflection has also been at the heart of the experience described below, I want to insert a few thoughts about this distinction. The reflection about God and the Divine (creed), that is, theological reflection proper, differs in character from that on ethical values, norms, and virtues, that is, on human actions and desirable social and legal norms (codes), because creeds (and cults) are specific to each religion and consequently mutually exclusive. To put it simply: Those who are theists cannot be non-theists at the same time. Those who believe in the Holy Quran as God's final word will not consider the New Testament their Holy Scripture and Jesus, the Anointed Son of God and vice versa. For Jews the Hebrew Bible is the book through which God revealed Himself and so on. The list could be prolonged. This very exclusivity shapes religious identities and creates borders between different religions. Interreligious dialogue on such issues therefore can only consist in listening, in the attempt to better understand the other and with the other also ourselves and our own religious heritage and belief. Such dialogues are most valuable, but also rather difficult since they require a profound ability to reflect on one’s own faith tradition and find the right words to communicate them to others outside our own religious community, which is not easy since the terminology mostly constitutes a form of speech directed to insiders.

Ethical codes, to the contrary, are not mutually exclusive but open to debate and argument and, most importantly, there is a wide range of overlapping consensus between them in different religions. Ethics tend toward universality, because the underlying anthropological assumptions are similar: humans have a special status in all religions; they are able to do the good as well as the bad (i.e., they are endowed with a certain degree of freedom, and they carry responsibility). Questions such as: How should I treat my neighbor, mother, father, and children; how can I do justice to others. Which laws can serve a peaceful and decent society are subject to human reasoning, i.e. ethics, in all religions. Indeed, the largest part of theological writings in the monotheistic religions is on such issues. The aim of this ethical discourse is the just, loving, compassionate person, as well as the decent and just society with institutions and laws that further the common good. Therefore, the vision of what it means to be good and just is fairly similar in all societies and throughout the ages, if one avoids staring at much discussed differences, as is the case in to what the other called “culture wars” (Gabriel 2017). In this area of ethics therefore we not only listen what the other has to say but we actively discuss how to create a better society and indeed world by
learning from each other. This sort of ethical dialogue is more needed than ever in a world where people of different creeds and beliefs live in close vicinity to each other.

THE VIENNA DIALOGUE INITIATIVE AND THE VIENNA CHRISTIAN-ISLAMIC SUMMER UNIVERSITY (VICISU): EXAMPLES FOR INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERS

The Vienna Dialogue Initiative (VDI) was started by a Roman Catholic priest (Andreas Bsteh), who in the wake of Vatican II and its Declaration on Non-Christian religions, Nostra aetate (1965), started it in the 1980s. It existed without interruption till 2008. As a successive initiative VICISU was founded, bringing together students, mainly of Muslim and Christian faiths, every second year for three weeks in a Benedictine monastery in Austria, Stift Altenburg, one hour’s drive from Vienna (“The Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University” 2017). Because of their longue durée both initiatives can provide valuable insights into the nature, prospects, and limits of interfaith dialogue, some of which I have described above.

A first step in this endeavor was the exploration of the intellectual traditions of the world religions to further mutual understanding and discover their common human ground. The symposia that took place in the 1980s and 1990s on theological issues proper were to serve as a foundation. Through the very breadth of issues treated, they showed the seriousness and sensitivity of the project and also served as a preparation for the subsequent encounters. In a second step, for reasons mentioned above, ethical issues stood in the foreground. Moreover, the focus now was on the relationship between Christianity and Islam, as the two largest world religions. The Vienna Christian-Muslim Round Table took place every two years between 2000 and 2008 with the participation of renowned Christian and Muslim scholars from various academic backgrounds, half of them men and half women. The topics treated were those central to a global ethics: poverty, violence, education, equality, and the guiding question was: what contributions can Christians and Muslims make to world peace? It greatly contributed to the success of these conferences that the circle of participants remained more or less the same through this period. This also made it easier to go into depth. Moreover, the atmosphere of friendship which developed in the course of these encounters proved to be intellectually stimulating. In 2005 we decided to initiate a summer school with students selected by the participants of the round table, which since then has been held every second year starting in 2008. Each time 40–50 young people participated, mainly of Muslim and Christian faith background. The academic program of three weeks starts with introductory courses into Islam and Christianity, as well as a course on interreligious dialogue. The second week is devoted to variety of ethical topics (status of women, peace issues, etc.); the third week to law, international law, and regulations. It is thus a demanding interdisciplinary program taught by professors from different countries and faith traditions in English, which is not the majority of participants’ mother tongue. In addition to these courses, there are mul-

\[\text{See Gabriel (2010) for more details. Here also all publications from these and other dialogues, also translated into English and Arabic, are listed.}\]
titude of activities and encounters that are at least as important. It is the experience of living for three weeks in an interreligious community. This leads to communication and dialogue with an intensity that is possible only among young intelligent people who want to discover their world with the intention to shape it. Indeed, what I found most impressive at the introductory sessions was what most of them expressed as their guiding idea: to learn from others so as to contribute to world development, thus showing a keen sense of responsibility for the future. Practically all students made very good use of this opportunity during the three weeks. It was an amazing experience how each time, in this campus atmosphere in the countryside far from the distractions of the city, in a peaceful and spiritual surrounding, young people from most diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds were stimulated to interact with each other and become indeed friends. Once my assistant picked me up at the train station when I was one day late and told me about the variety of subjects the students had already discussed within this first day. Respect for each others’ beliefs was never a problem. When discussions became too heated, there was football. Dancing, singing, and cooking together contributed to an atmosphere of joy. For most participants the three weeks passed too quickly because there was so much to be learned in what they experienced as a world in a nutshell. After all, one rarely has the opportunity to talk to a person, say, from Malaysia, to learn firsthand what is going on in his/her country.

So as to be able to organize such a summer school, it was of great help that there already existed a network of partner institutions from participants of former academic dialogues, on which we could rely. But subsequently there also came applications over the Internet from countries with which we had had no prior contacts over the Internet and this also worked well. The financial support from the Austrian ministry of education allowed us to invite young people from rather diverse social backgrounds, which we also considered a considerable asset.

What was striking for everybody in retrospect was how different these personal encounters were as compared to the often gory daily news on religious relations. This made them precious as well as hope-giving. They were a kind of reality check, since they reminded us that the headlines about religious fanatics in the media do not represent the much more complex and enriching reality in any way. They thus helped to revive the great vision of ONE world, which we so direly need these days. Thus, the central feeling after weeks of intensive talks, lectures, and personal encounters was that the often disconcerting political developments, bloodshed, persecutions, and suffering caused by various sectarian and ideologically motivated movements were not the whole, and not even the most important part of, the picture. Although one cannot and should not close one’s eyes to them, dialogue in this tense and growingly polarized situation is a powerful and much needed form of peaceful and nonviolent resistance. Meeting others from all over the world face to face, discussing issues of mutual importance, and enjoying meals and laughter together show that millions of people of all religions lead good and decent everyday lives, study, pray, and are united in love with other people. And there are young, intelligent, and dedicated people all over the world who want to make this world a more peaceful place.

I started out by asking two questions. First, is there a risk of syncretism in such dialogues? In our experience this was definitely not the case. The stories told were those of learning from the creed and practice of the other’s religion so as to better
practice one’s own. And what about the question that this is a rather elitist undertaking, but does not reach those most in need of it? I think what is going on in our present world is an intense battle over the minds and hearts of future generations, which may laconically be described as one of tolerance versus intolerance, inward turning particularism versus outward turning universalism, and ultimately dialogue versus violence. We therefore need to give future opinion makers and multipliers a chance to take the path conducive toward peace by creating spaces and encounters where this peace is both possible and experienced. We thus should establish strong and resilient *alliances of moderates* that last and are more powerful than those of fanatics of all shades. Education can give young people such opportunities and enable them to engage in discernment processes through existential experience that can best be gained in personal encounters. They are greatly needed in a world with stunning technical means so that our humanity, our emotions, and also our religious development can follow suit, shaping stronger and more humane personalities through dialogue that are able to serve their societies and promote peace.

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