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How May the Academic Study of Religions Assist the Dialogue of Religions?

Distinguishing between science of religions and dialogue of religions

The purpose of this article is to consider some of the ways in which the academic study of religions may be able to assist in the continuing process of dialogue between religions. To do this, it is necessary first to distinguish clearly between the two. The academic, scientific study of religions (science of religions, or *Religionswissenschaft*¹) is itself a non-religious activity. It is agreed in many quarters, and here, that it should not be confused with theological and dialogical activity which have their own *rationale*. The dialogue between religions, for its part, certainly is in some sense a religious activity. It involves the presentation and exchange of religious experiences and religious positions. It is possible for such dialogues to take place without reference to the academic, scientific study of religions. Indeed this often happens. Yet it is conceivable that those involved in such dialogues might benefit from the perspectives which this discipline opens up. The present article, based on earlier presentations, makes some suggestions in this direction.²

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¹ The regular German term *Religionswissenschaft* is more compact, and a comparable term in Japanese is *shūkyōgaku*.

² The article draws in particular on two lectures given at universities with a Buddhist orientation, Ōtani University in Kyoto, Japan, and Wongkwang University at Iksan, Korea. Thanks are due to the organisers of a lecture and seminar programme at Ōtani University in October 2000, which was conceived as a continuation of the 3rd Rudolf Otto Symposium held in Marburg 1999 (see further below). This lecture was first delivered in Japanese on the basis of bilingual notes and a formalised version was published in *Marburg Journal of Religion* under the title “The study of religions and the dialogue of religions (Shūkyōgaku to shūkyōtaiwa)”, (<http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/mjr/>), Volume 6, No. 2 (June 2001). Two sections found there but not incorporated here are entitled “Dominant models of religion dependent on cultural difference” and “On taking account of all four main aspects of religion”. The lecture for Wonkwang University, Iksan, Republic of Korea, was held in October 2006 at a conference to mark the 60th anniversary of its foundation. The title was “Peace and Religious Dialogue. Facts, Structures, Perspectives”, taking account of the conference theme, and a section entitled “How can religious dialogues be structured?” has been used here.

Since the study of religions is in principle a *non*-religious, scientific undertaking, it does not, as a secular enterprise, promote or contribute to religious programmes. This may seem to suggest that there is not and should not be any relationship between the study of religions and dialogue between religions. From one point of view this is correct. How can “the study of religions” have an involvement with any dialogues between religions at all, apart from simply observing them? Indeed, it would be easy for specialists in the study of religions simply to withdraw from the arena of public discussion. This would be legitimate in itself, and some specialists may prefer to adopt such a course, perhaps claiming purism. However, if we are not oblivious to the human situation as a whole, and if we take the totality of society and culture seriously, perhaps something more may be expected, even from careful specialists. Nor do the necessary distinctions need to be obscured.

The strict view of the “science of religions” is not just a contemporary fashion, nor a western invention. It was anticipated in a statement by the eighteenth century Japanese thinker Tominaga Nakamoto, at the end of chapter 24 of his *Shutsujōkōgo*, where he says “I am not a follower of Confucianism, nor of Daoism, nor of Buddhism. I watch their words and deeds from the side and then privately debate them”. (Tominaga 1990: 168). In principle, agreement with this view is presupposed here. Only a science of religion which is independent of particular religious viewpoints can be expected to carry out steady, systematic observation and provide a worthwhile analysis of religious systems.³

“Observation” in this context does not merely mean looking. Rather it implies looking *at* with a view to understanding, analysing and explaining. In other words it implies the full range of “scientific” reflection in relation to the particular field of religious systems. While this is not the place to provide a general introduction to the methods and theory of the study of religions, it may be helpful to recall the four main steps in such research. They can be set out as follows:

- (preliminary theory)
- (1) elucidation
 - (2) characterisation
 - (3) analysis
 - (4) correlation
- (subsequent theory)

Of these the first two steps are “recognitional” in that they are concerned with perceiving and understanding religious phenomena. The second two are “explanatory” in that they *explain* both by means of an analysis of internal structures (step 3) and by establishing correlations with other social and cultural factors (step 4). While moving through these four steps, both the relevance of comparison and the possibility of tension with the believers increases. This may

³ Cf. for example, Pye 1994, 1999, 2000a, 2000b.

be referred to as the “tension with believers factor” or TWB factor. (Pye 1999) It is important for those who study religions to be aware of the varying level of this tension with believers factor. If it is high during the recognitional steps, there is something wrong with the method of enquiry. If it is untypically low during the explanatory steps, this may suggest that the explanations are weak, or it may suggest something interesting about the nature of the religion under study.

It is important therefore clearly to distinguish between the activity of carrying out religious dialogues and the activity of studying religions as systems. Religious dialogues may be part of the field of study. Because of the complexity of the field of study, which is not only a historical field but also a living, active part of contemporary culture, it is natural for the specialist to be drawn close to the events of the day, and in a certain sense to participate in them. This is an opportunity for participant observation, and sometimes even of observant participation. In addition to this normal feature of a research process, it is also possible, and indeed probable, that some of the theoretical perspectives of the study of religions could be relevant to the future progress of dialogues between religions. In the next section therefore a few reasons will be adduced for encouraging a close proximity between the study of religions and the various activities of religious dialogue.

Why is the study of religions relevant to the dialogue of religions?

The representatives of various religious organisations who engage in dialogues with each other are usually most sincere and respectful in their approach. However, even with the best of intentions it is possible for misunderstandings to occur. How can a real dialogue between religions come about unless accurate information and instructive analysis is available? It may be helpful therefore if specialists in the study of religions are permitted in some way to share in dialogue events when they take place. Even though they do not *represent* a particular religion, they may nevertheless be able to assist in the work of elucidation and analysis. Thus their participation may help to stabilise and facilitate the process of dialogue in particular situations.

What sometimes happens is that the more sensitive participants in a dialogue between religions, after making their first contact, in effect leave their committed positions to one side and begin to take up the study of religions for themselves. They realise and understand that accurate and reliable knowledge is required, not only about their own religion, but about the other religion also. They may also press forward to a comparative analysis. Dietrich Korsch, for example, a systematic theologian participating in the 1999 Symposium in Marburg between Shin Buddhism and Protestant Theology, noticed that it would be interesting to analyse comparatively the formal structures of different religions. (Barth et al. 2000: 163-164) Since such an analysis would be independent of the specific details of the belief contents of any particular religion, it amounts to a reinvention of the science of religion, or at least of part of it. It would be similar to what has earlier been called “comparative hermeneutics” (Pye and Morgan 1973), and more generally

it would be related to the analysis of the dynamics of religious tradition, that is to questions about transmission, adjustment, correlation, and so on.

Of course, this process of analysis does not *always* take place. In some cases, after an initial exploration, a concluding solution is found by some of the dialogue partners which simply favours the “home” religion. In that case no further information is really perceived to be necessary. In other words the *religious* position becomes dominant again, and the “study of religions” is left to one side. If a person has faith in “the name of Jesus” for example, why should he or she be interested in studying various religions and analysing their similarities? It will probably seem to such a person to be more valuable to emphasise difference. The same thought may occur to a person who has faith in Amida’s fundamental vow (*hongan*). However, while such simple faith may be necessary, and even sufficient, for living and dying, the questions of reason remain, even if they are secondary questions. Thus, as soon as we begin to *think* about it all, the study of religions in a comparative perspective inevitably arises once again.

Finally, and not least important, social and political discussions about the legal position of various religions are being carried out today as never before, although these discussions also have a considerable history. Should historically strong religions like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or Shintō have a privileged position in society or not? If so, what about newer, smaller religious groups and movements, of which there are very many? Should these even be permitted to exist? Religions which have come under criticism recently from this point of view are Aum Shinrikyō (in Japan), Scientology (in Germany) and Falungong (in China). These have all been regarded, with greater or less evidence being adduced, as threatening to undermine established society. At the time of their origins the same was said with regard to Buddhism and Christianity. Of course, all of these religions are not just the same as each other. Moreover some cause more social disruption and suffering than others. But how will social commentators, journalists and politicians be able to discuss these matters properly unless they have clear and reliable information about the various religions in question? For this, the study of religions is necessary.

With all this in mind, it appears that it would be valuable for those engaged in religious dialogues to take “the study of religions” seriously and to assist in its development. This is not because specialists in the study of religions necessarily have more knowledge at their disposal. In fact, when a specialised dialogue is taking place the representatives on each side are almost certain to have more specialised knowledge, at least about their own side. In wider discussions, however, the study of religions as a discipline may be able to provide a theoretical and comparative reference point or perspective which can be shared by those who otherwise have different religious or other convictions.

A shared presupposition

A most important underlying presupposition which is shared by the scientific study of religions and all forms of religious dialogue, different though these are, is the perception of the plurality of religions as a state of affairs. Significantly, it was one of the starting points for the European Enlightenment's reflection about religion, and at the same time for the eighteenth century Japanese thinker Tominaga Nakamoto who was quoted above. It is significant that the quotation was drawn from his chapter on the "three teachings" (*sankyō* 三教), a well-known Chinese expression (*sān jiào*) which sums up the *plurality* of religions in one simple phrase. In the study of religions itself, therefore, the perception of the plurality of religions is not problematic. It is a natural state of affairs.

This presupposition can be seen in a discussion paper by sociologist of religion Peter Berger, published in the first issue of the journal *Buddhist-Christian Studies* in which he discussed "the pluralistic situation" and "the coming dialogue" between the world religions, as he referred to them. (Berger 1981: 31-41) His concluding question was how two religions, such as Buddhism and Christianity, can be "true together"? This question replaces the older western questions about *which* religion is true, and why. However we should not get carried away here by the idea that there might be an easy solution to the new questions. Even if some Buddhists and some Christians agree on a selected "something" there are so many religions in the world as a whole that it is difficult to see how they can all be true "together" unless the statements which they make, or which arise by implication, are relatively meaningless. So there remains an open philosophical question about the nature of truth claims in religion and the criteria by which it might be meaningful to assess them. While the scientific study of religions is not directly concerned with the philosophical assessment of truth claims advanced by religions, it may be able to assist in their identification and clarification.

Although the same presupposition underlies many well-meaning approaches to religious dialogue or "inter-faith" programmes, the perception of the plurality of religions *may* seem to be problematic from the point of view of religious conviction or commitment. This is because the very existence of diverse religious orientations may seem to relativise the truth or value of the "home" religion, thereby creating danger. In other religious understandings, however, the plurality of religions is not regarded as a problem because the final truth is simply regarded as going beyond them all. Thus historically, the emergence of the comparative study of religions (in their plurality) has often been associated with the view that there is a common principle or essence underlying them all. Nowadays however, in scientific terms, this idea is widely regarded as a blind alley. As a result, thinking about the plurality of religions separates into two directions. In connection with the scientific study of religions, the unity of religions is not even necessarily regarded as a reality, and certainly not as an objective. The study of religions simply concentrates on the analysis of religions, in the plural, as they happen to be. The activity of dialogue between religions on the other hand has as its objective such values as mutual

understanding, coexistence and cooperation. These relations can be shown by means of a simple flow-chart, for which see Diagram 1 at the end of this paper.

Religious solutions to the perception of plurality

At this point, looking at it from an observer's point of view, it will be helpful to note that there are various ways in which dialogue between religions has been approached by religiously oriented people. Some of these are highly organised and some are rather informal. While in general the sincerity of the participants need not be questioned there may be a multiple motivation. Sometimes an important function is to achieve a public relations effect within the home religious community. This often plays a role in Japanese religions, reflecting the more general use of elements of foreign culture to provide legitimacy or added value to Japanese cultural activities or commercial products. In religion, it makes a good impression for leaders to be seen having an audience with the Pope or the Dalai Lama and for the photographs to appear in magazines circulating among the believers at home. Among the various ways in which religious dialogue is taken up by religious people, let us note the following four.

First, well established religious organisations discover, on the margins of their institutions, that there is a problem of correlation with so-called "other" religions. This problem is sometimes addressed negatively and polemically, and sometimes constructively and cooperatively. As a result there is a tradition of writing, especially in Christian theology, about the relationship between Christianity and "other faiths", this relationship being variously conceived. Often, the question of how to think about the "other" religions is left to a secondary, relatively unimportant position in the theological system. This habit of thinking has occasionally been criticised by those who study the general history of religions. (Smart 1962, Pye 1976, 1979) Usually there is a clear conception of the religion which forms the starting point, and a less clear understanding of the "other" religions which have to be taken into account. This holds good both for those with a negative view of the religions (e.g. the protestant theologian Karl Barth) and in some cases for those who take a more positive view (e.g. the liberal catholic theologian Hans Küng). In any case the attempt is made, perhaps understandably enough, somehow to fit the various "other" religions into the worldview of the starting point. It is of course not only the Christian tradition which has produced reflection upon its own procedures in this regard. Consider for example the instructive title *The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation. The Historical Development of the Honji Suijaku Theory* (Matsunaga 1969), in which the thought processes leading up to that particular solution are studied in detail. Various attempts have been made to chart systematically the options which are available in the correlation of an "own" tradition with an "other" tradition, a recent substantial study being that by Andreas Grünschloss in *Der eigene und der fremde Glaube* (1999). While this work addresses a theological audience in some parts (and indeed the author

describes himself as a *Grenzgänger*, that is, a frontier-crosser) the main intention is to analyse possible positions and procedures on the basis of the observation of several religions.

Second, there are more recently founded religions which, from their very inception, have a point of view about the integration or mutual harmony of existing religions. The Japanese religion Ananaikyō may be mentioned as an example. Other examples which are globally active are the Unification Church which originated in Korea and the Baha'i religion, which originated in Iran. Such religions start out with a view about the relationship between various religions for the simple reason that at the time of their conception it was already evident that there were other well organised religions in existence. In such cases it is therefore a natural, almost a necessary requirement to say what part these play in the new message. Interestingly, although there are quite a lot of religions which somehow assert "the unity" of all religions, these do not usually cooperate very much with each other, if at all. On the contrary they continue to offer their own distinctive, superior message. Little thought seems to have been given about how this endemic problem could be overcome.

Third, there is an increasing number of interreligious or "interfaith" organisations which operate independently of the institutionalised religions, e.g. the World Congress of Faiths, the World's Parliament of Religions, and the recently founded United Religions. In general these organisations are supported by individuals who themselves have an extremely positive attitude towards the various religions of the world. The history of such "interfaith organisations" is in fact quite long, and in view of the rapid development of global consciousness in the twentieth century it is perhaps surprising that these organisations are not even stronger than they are. There are various possible reasons for this. For one thing, the activists who support them either come from small religious groups themselves, like the Brahma Kumaris active in the International Interfaith Centre at Oxford, England, or they are *non-typical* members of larger religions, e.g. Anglican or Catholic priests acting with at best very tenuous hierarchical legitimation for their interfaith work. Moreover the various interfaith movements to some extent compete with each other as organisations, each with their own leaders and characteristic interests. Any suggestion that they might consider integration usually falls on deaf ears. This is presumably because each organisation has its own social dynamics, leadership aspirations, legitimational needs for funding, and so on.

Fourth, there have been a small number of clearly organised dialogues between genuinely representative groups from established religions. Such dialogues are very demanding, for the simple reason that there is a very strong sense of responsibility to the specific religious traditions concerned, together with a real need for new knowledge and new awareness of the partner tradition. This pattern may turn out to be more significant, in the long run, than has hitherto been recognised. Examples and recommendations will be found further below.

Different kinds of religions: primal and critical

Though “religions” or religious systems, religious orientations or religious traditions, are plural, this does not mean that they are all the same. There are different kinds of religions. Though this a huge field of study, let us briefly consider at least one fundamental distinction in the typology of religions which appears to command a certain assent. This has implications for dialogues between religions. Though the same general distinction may be current under varied terminology, the terms “primal” and “critical” are preferred by the present writer. The term “critical religions” is used to include sub-categories such as soteriological religions, “awareness” or “gnostic” religions, and “guidance” (*michibiki*) religions, while avoiding an undue emphasis on any one of these sub-categories. The point is simply that a “critical” religion distances itself in some way from the more or less unthinkingly accepted, primal religious culture of the time, creating a difference. To illustrate with straightforward examples, Buddhism is a critical form of religion over against Brahmanism (i.e. the “Hinduism” of the period in which Buddhism arose), Christianity is a critical form of religion over against Judaism, Islam is a critical form of religion over against pre-Muslim polytheism, and Konkōkyō or Tenrikyō are critical forms of religion over against Shintō. This does not mean, as far as the study of religions is concerned, that either the critical or the primal types of religion are to be preferred. They are simply different types of religions which can be noted in the general history of religions. However, it will be evident that it does not make sense to speak loosely of “dialogue between world religions” as if all religions were simply the same kind of thing. There really are different *kinds* of religions. Following this relatively uncontroversial typology, the question arises whether there is a particular relation between the main types of religions and the kinds of dialogue which take place or which might be expected. There seems to be! Let us look at the possible relations in a simplified way. At this point borderline cases and cases where religions switch from one type to the other will be disregarded. The three standard relations are

- (1) primal-to-primal (parallels and selected contemporary themes)
- (2) primal-to-critical (critical points and selected contemporary themes)
- (3) critical-to-critical (parallels and selected contemporary themes)

First, then, there might be a dialogue between “primal religions”. This could involve two or more of, for example, the religions of North American Indians, of the Sami of Lapland, Yakutian shamanism and Japanese Shintō. Of course there are many differences here because Shintō, in particular, has undergone an immensely complicated development in connection with modernisation processes. The general point however is that there is not really any question of alternative truth claims here. Rather, such religious systems are the primal religions, or the adapted primal religions of different peoples. So their representatives and even their researchers are able to enjoy having conversations and making comparative

studies of, for example, the North American “sweat lodge”, the Finnish “sauna” and the Japanese “o-furo” (Jetsonen and Pentikäinen 2000), or they might have a conference on the theme of their relation to the environment, forest use, etc..

The second typical dialogue relation would be between primal religion(s) and critical religion(s). Such relations can be either cooperative or competitive. In the history of religions a sharing of functions can often be seen, the classic case for this being the history of Buddhism in various lands. The development of an intellectually reflective process about this, which is the beginning of “dialogue”, may be somewhat onesided. For example, more thought has been put into these questions from the Buddhist side of things than by those engaging in the worship of local spirits in South East Asia. Moreover the relationship, or dialogue, between critical and primal religions can be quite competitive, especially if the particularist aspect of primal religions is strongly criticised from the universalist standpoint of a salvationist religion. An example of this is the relationship between Christianity and Shintō in Japan, in which Shintō is usually criticised from the Christian side. However there may be new possibilities for positive dialogue here, especially if thematic subjects such as environmental questions and problems in medical ethics are considered.

The third typical relation would be between two “critical” religions. This can of course be very competitive but it can also lead to a dialogue between similar partners, even if they are not equal in all respects. Examples which will be discussed further below are the dialogues between (a) Tenrikyō and Catholicism and between (b) Shin Buddhism and German Protestant theology. In these dialogues significant analytical parallels have been noted while there has also been a wide range of common interests and common themes, such as ethical questions, the challenge of secularisation and so on. The competitive aspect might be expected to be high when the organisational interest is high (cf. below on different kinds of organisation), and yet this must not always be the case. A clear organisation can also lead to an effective dialogue, effective at least in the sense that a significant learning process can take place.

Dynamics, innovation – and dialogues

Religious systems, or religious traditions, are not just fixed entities but are of course subject to change for various reasons. Quite apart from the influence of external factors there is an innovative dimension to religion which takes various forms. This means that reinterpretations are unavoidable, and to some extent this may itself be part of the process of religious dialogue. It is therefore important for participants in religious dialogues to be aware of the processes of change, reinterpretation and adaptation. This raises the whole subject of the dynamics of religion, in which there are many sub-problems (for the academic study of religions) which cannot detain us here.

In brief, it seems that it might be of interest, even of importance, for participants in religious dialogues to reflect on their own position in the religious

dynamics which are current at any one time. Not all religious systems move at the same speed with respect to adaptive changes, and different parties within the same religion also move at different speeds. While it is obvious to the observer that every religious group includes both conservatives and reformers or liberals, it is possible that this is not merely because people tend to disagree about the speed of change, but because the system as a whole simply requires all of these parties in order to keep going. This needs to be understood in the situation of religious dialogues.

In an attempt to provide a general theory of religious innovation (which is only part of a wider theory of religious dynamics) I regularly delineate four main modes of innovation in religion as follows:

- a) innovation within the norms of current organisations
- b) innovative reform leading to organisational separation
- c) innovation with difference, but without clear organisational consequences
- d) innovation with difference, including new organisational forms.

This somewhat clinical classification is probably not controversial, and similar ones are not uncommon.⁴ The second mode leads to schismatic religious bodies or sects, in the classical or proper sense of the term, while the fourth leads to new religions. However, the implication for religious dialogues is that the third mode of religious innovation might be regarded, from an institutional point of view, as relatively irresponsible. This is because it is precisely *not* institutional. An example would be much of the innovative religious culture which goes under the name of “New Age” or new “spirituality”, a term used with little discipline. A significant proportion of the population of industrial or post-industrial societies participates in such activities. This represents a considerable challenge for the understanding of religious dialogues or for the analysis of the various options available.

It seems that in considering the relevance of innovation to religious dialogues a typology of relative institutionalisation is required. At one end might be clear-cut ecclesiastical institutions such as the Vatican, while at the other end there might be rather unclearly organised contributions to religious culture in the New Age style, as referred to above. More structured dialogue may be expected to be carried out by the representatives of institutions, while less structured dialogue is carried out between individuals as the bearers of non-institutional elements of religious culture. Can religious dialogues be carried on by more or less independent or even isolated individuals? Perhaps in some ways they can. On the other hand, dialogue may seem to be more serious, and more binding, when there is some kind of

⁴ The detailed argument is in an unpublished but widely distributed paper entitled “Elements of a general theory of innovation in religion”. The term *innovation* is the most neutral and general term for these divergent modes, of which the appearance of “new religions” or so-called “new religious movements” (NRMs) is but one. Naturally, other scholars thinking about these processes with particular interests in mind provide similar summaries of the options, but with some variations. A close parallel may be found in Repp 2005a: 524.

institutional social structure to the dialogue, as in some of the organised dialogues to be mentioned below. In short, the question is, who has the right to carry out a dialogue, and on the part of whom? Unfortunately the answers to this are not simple. Perhaps they are inevitably endless.

A further distinction may be made between “hard” dialogue and “soft” dialogue. In this usage, “hard” dialogue would be self-presentational, uncompromising and in the end unproductive. On the other hand, “soft” dialogue might be understood to be gentle, patient, imaginative and creative, leaving many questions open for future consideration. In general people are not prepared to be identified with “hard” dialogue. Rather, even while standing firmly in a specific religious tradition, they prefer to think of themselves as taking part in “soft” dialogue. Consequently, even though there may be quite clear and strong institutions in the background, such as the Higashi Honganji for Shin Buddhism, or the German Protestant Church (Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands), it seems best to preserve the terms “hard” and “soft” for *attitudes* rather than for relative institutionalisation. It is quite possible for those representing institutions to be gentle and creative, or in other words to engage in “soft” dialogue. At the same time we need to have some sensitivity to the relative pace of “hard” and “soft” dialogue, for these can be related to the internal dynamics of the religious traditions involved, to reforms, innovations, conservative reactions, and so on.

How can religious dialogues be structured?

At this point we will consider two clear models for dialogues between members of different religious communities or representatives of different religious traditions, whether the meeting has a particular theme such as peace, education, family ethics, or some other matter of mutual interest. Both of these models include a mediatory function on the part of specialists in the study of religions. Of course, it is quite possible for religious representatives simply to meet each other without the involvement of any other parties. There is no objection to that. However, dialogues whose social structure also involves specialists in religion – who are not themselves representing a religious viewpoint – may bring more results. The first model is that of meetings between representatives of two specific religious communities, with specialists in the study of religions in attendance. It has already been recommended within the context of the examples given below. (Pye 2004) The second model is provided by those meetings where the representation is less clearly defined and the various functions are assumed by individuals rather than by designated groups.

In the first model (see Diagram 2, at end of paper), the ideal is in fact a fourfold structure consisting of (a and b) academic representatives of each of the two religions plus (c) specialists in the study of religions with relevant expertise plus (d) representatives of central institutions of each of the two religious groups (e.g. from a head temple or a coordinating committee). The last mentioned

provide support and *legitimation* for the academic representatives of the religious institutions, while the specialists in the study of religions for their part have the task of mediation perhaps linguistically, but above all in the exchange of ideas. The specialists should have expertise in one or both of the religious systems in question, and be able to represent their ideas fairly. This involves careful listening, with a view to assisting in the removal of misunderstandings which might otherwise go unnoticed. Here *mediation* is the key function (c.f. Franke 2005).

This model has already been illustrated very well in two quite different contexts. First, meetings have taken place between academic representatives of Tenrikyō, from Tenri University, and the Catholic Church, mainly from the Gregorian University in Rome. Again some leading representatives of central institutions were present, as well as specialists in the study of religions with relevant knowledge. The latter were able to assist in the shaping of some of the selected themes, which included both patterns of salvation and questions of family ethics, and to spot some misunderstandings which would otherwise have been left in the air.⁵ These meetings took place first in Rome and then in Tenri City, Japan, and the proceedings were published both in Japanese and in English. (The Organizing Committee of Tenrikyō-Christian Dialogue 1999, 2005) The first of these meetings, held at the Gregorian University, was accompanied by an informative exhibition about the Tenrikyō religion. While the contents of the discussions were serious, it cannot be disputed that the relative organisational strength of the two religions is very different. Yet the dialogue itself, not least because of the gracious attitude adopted on both sides, did not seem one-sided at the time. Because of the imbalance of size between these two dialogue partners, the significance of the dialogue for the Tenrikyō side was considerably greater than it was for the Catholic side. The vast majority of Catholics, even of clergy and teachers, will probably never even hear that this dialogue took place, whereas on the Tenrikyō side it is much better known through publications for the members.

In a quite different context dialogues with a similar structure have been conducted between academic representatives of the Japanese Buddhist denomination Jōdo Shinshū, mainly but not exclusively from Ōtani University, Kyoto, and representatives of the Faculty of Protestant Theology of the University of Marburg, Germany. In the case of Shin Buddhism representatives of the Higashi Honganji (the head temple and administrative centre of one of the major denominations of Shin Buddhism) were also present, and on the Protestant side there were also persons with regional church functions. A full symposium took place twice, with particular themes such as the challenge of secularisation being pursued, while additional meetings followed which built on the basic pattern. Proceedings were published in German and in Japanese (Barth et al. 2000, Pye et al. 2003, Barth et al. 2004), a major editorial role being played by Japanese

⁵ The four were: Martin Kraatz (Marburg), Johannes Laube (München), Michael Pye (Marburg) and Ninian Smart (Santa Barbara). They were asked both to produce their own papers and to moderate sessions.

colleagues Kadowaki Ken, Minoura Eryō and Miyashita Seishi. The special feature of this dialogue is that it was already well known, academically, that there are most interesting similarities in the structures of faith, belief and practice between these two religions. If only for this reason, the intellectual level of the contributions from both sides was very demanding. This meant that great efforts had to be made as far as linguistic translation and interpretation are concerned. It also meant that a serious process of getting to know the other tradition was set in motion, which would not otherwise have occurred for most of the participants. The initial event was accompanied not only by an exhibition of books and hanging scrolls pertaining to Shin Buddhism, but also by a *gongyō* service carried out by representatives of the Higashi Honganji in the festive lecture hall of Marburg University. Needless to say, this dialogue is itself part of a much wider and complex interaction between Buddhism and Christianity which has been documented and discussed in great detail by writers such as John D'Arcy May (1984), Michael von Brück and Whalen Lai (1997) and Perry Schmidt-Leukel (1992). However a special feature of this particular case is that the dialogue took place between representative *groups*, probably for the first time between these two well balanced dialogue partners. It may also be noted that in this case, too, a mediatory function was carried out by specialists in the study of religions.

The second model is less formally structured in that it does not consist precisely of a meeting between two sides. There is no institutional intention to mount a dialogue between the representatives of two religious traditions, even though this might be a significant by-product of the meeting. The meeting, held around a specific theme, is *academically* conceived, while at the same time the religious affiliation of many participants is undeniable and usually undenied. Specialists in the study of religions with relevant knowledge are present among the group, sometimes to offer a particular contribution of their own but above all to provide mediation. The difference from the first model is not very great, but in general the representation is less clearly defined and the various functions are assumed by individuals rather than by designated groups. It is noteworthy that some participants whose main responsibility is to represent a religion as “theologians” (or the equivalent thereof) are quite likely to begin to function also as specialists in “the study of religions”, and indeed this process has sometimes been called for from within a theological perspective.⁶ This doubling of functions

⁶ As for example by Martin Repp, who writes at the conclusion of his article “Religionsgespräche zwischen Jesuiten und Buddhisten im Japan des 16./17. Jahrhunderts”: “In gleicher Weise verlangt auch das Engagement im interreligiösen Dialog das gründliche Studium der betreffenden Religion, inklusive deren Sprache und Primärquellen ... Hier hat die Theologie wieder neu die Religionswissenschaft zu entdecken, die sie so lange sträflich vernachlässigt hatte. Das Studium der anderen Religionen hat um ihrer selbst willen zu geschehen ... Dies wiederum hat zum Ziel, in konstruktiv-kritischer Auseinandersetzung sich für die Verwirklichung des Religionsfriedens einzusetzen”. (Repp 2005b: 53).

may sometimes be confusing for others, but on the other hand the increased interest shown in the factuality of diverse religions can be welcomed. Apart from specialists in the study of religions, other academics may be involved who provide yet other interdisciplinary perspectives, e.g. sociology or psychology, but who are also not representing any religious community as such. Meetings following this second model are academically conceived from the start, and accordingly have rather less symbolic significance for the institutions of the two religious traditions, who are not formally represented. They are quite common, but to illustrate, mention will be made here of two examples only, in which the present writer found himself involved.

In the first example of this type, the meeting was conceived in 2003 very shortly after the Iraq war had been started by the United States and other countries which were “willing” or pressurised to take part in it. Just at that time I was privileged, together with Edith Franke (then from Hanover), to visit various educational institutions in Indonesia where colleagues and students wanted in particular to know how studies about religion could be connected to questions of peace, including the relations between religious traditions. The question was also posed several times, by mainly Muslim hearers, as to how the study of religions, if it is not to be based on a particular religious viewpoint, can be in any way socially relevant or socially engaged? Accordingly, we tried to set this out in a series of theses, based on a non-theological concept of the study of the study of religions, which we presented to audiences for discussion.⁷ Consequent on these discussions we were able to assist in the arrangement of an international conference held in Java in 2004 (a dual site conference in the two cities of Yogyakarta and Semarang) on the subject of “Religious Harmony: Problems, Practice and Education”, which was attended by scholars from many countries and in particular by leading Muslim scholars of Indonesia. It was classified as a regional conference of the International Association for the History of Religions⁸ and at the same time supported by the Indonesian Ministry of Religion (Departemen Agama). One of the key themes of this conference was education, in particular religious education, and the programme included visits to Muslim boarding schools, known in Bahasa Indonesia as *pesantren*. The impressions from these visits were considered in some detail by the participants and the point was clearly made that these schools are *not* a training ground for the political radicalism which encourages violence. Rather, based on a strong consciousness of Muslim identity, young people are being educated into a constructive attitude to “religious harmony”, as it is usually called in this context.⁹

⁷ These numbered theses were later tested before other audiences in Indonesia and in Germany, and published in both English and in Bahasa Indonesia (Franke and Pye 2004).

⁸ It may be noted that this was the first time that a conference sponsored by the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) was ever held in a predominantly Muslim country.

⁹ The discussion of this subject may be found in the published proceedings (Franke et al. 2005 and 2006). Apart from a range of wider papers, it was valuable that some really expert knowledge was available on the particular subject of the *pesantren*. Of course it is

This is an example of how a most interesting meeting can lead to new perceptions by less well-informed participants and at the same time to the encouragement of those who are maintaining liberal and socially responsible positions in their own social context. The conference mentioned here was not formally structured as a “dialogue” and its dialogical character was rather accidental. It was intended to be a meeting of specialists in the study of religions from various countries including Indonesia itself. In fact however, since a large number of the participants were Islamic educationists, it was widely perceived by them as a many-faceted opportunity not only for dialogue with non-Indonesians, but also between Muslims and Indonesian non-Muslims. Thus it did not simply become a dialogue between two clear-cut parties. Moreover serious attention was given to methods and perspectives in the study of religions, as well as to various case studies of religious interaction, by various Indonesian and foreign participants.

As a second example of this type we may adduce a recent symposium on “prayer” held at Marburg, Germany, in 2006 and attended by various academics from Tenri University and from Marburg University. It included a majority of Christian (in this case Protestant) and Tenri theologians, two specialists in psychology and sociology, and four persons specialising in the study of religions with knowledge of Tenrikyō and Christianity respectively. Although not a few of the participants in this symposium themselves had a religious orientation as well as an academic one, the roles were much less clearly articulated than in the previously mentioned joint conferences between representatives of Tenrikyō and of the Catholic Church. This was a case where individuals not infrequently switched roles from time to time. In particular one could observe how participants with a religious orientation perceived a need to develop a “study of religions” framework for the exchange of perceptions concerning the phenomenon of prayer.¹⁰

Just two models of dialogue have been briefly illustrated here, each with two examples. This does not exclude the possibility that a wide range of variations could be conceived. The general point being made here however is that, whichever of these two models is espoused, it is possible, and indeed desirable, for “the study of religions” to maintain its independent character. At the same time, this does not mean that specialists in the study of religions cannot take part, in an appropriate way, in the complex dialogues currently taking place between various religious traditions. Indeed, their participation is desirable, for they may be able to contribute both useful knowledge and communicatory mediation.

possible that other kinds of Muslim schools, for example in Pakistan, are not similar in this respect (cf. Lys 2006).

¹⁰ Publication of the edited contributions to this symposium is anticipated in the very near future, probably in English and Japanese, and enquiries may be addressed to Tenri University.

Dialogue can be more than the exchange of ideas

It is rather common to assume that in a “dialogue” people meet to exchange their ideas, but in reality religious systems include much more than ideas. Looking at the morphology of religion from the standpoint of the academic or scientific study of religions, it is rather straightforward to delineate four main aspects which need to be considered in every case, namely: the conceptual or symbolic, the subjective or affective, the behavioural, and the social. Each of these stands in some relationship to the others, as I have explained in more detail elsewhere. (Pye 1972, 1994) The point to note here is that these four main aspects, in so far as they provide a stable and comprehensive morphological starting point for specialists in the study of religions, also should be taken seriously by participants in religious dialogues. To put it briefly, dialogue is not only in the head. There is also, secondly, an affective aspect. Thirdly, it is possible to carry out dialogue “by doing” something, for example by taking part in joint meditation exercises or shared social welfare activity. Finally, the dialogue will be carried out by persons who stand in a social relationship of some kind to each other, whether it is highly official or relatively tenuous. It is not possible to go into examples of all these aspects here. Let the point be illustrated however, most briefly, with reference to the dialogue between Shin Buddhism and Protestant Christianity.

Most frequently, interest has been shown in the various ways in which the conceptual apparatus of these two traditions can be understood. In particular the idea is current that modes of thinking might be transferred from one tradition to the other in a fruitful way. It has been argued, for example, that the concept of demythologisation can be transferred from debates in Christian theology to the interpretation of the figure of Amida Buddha and the Pure Land. What do “mythological” concepts mean existentially? In the other direction the suggestion has been entertained that the idea of skilful means might be transferred from Buddhism to Christianity. (Pye 1990, 1998, Sharma 1990, Hick 1993) It was also suggested during the Marburg symposium that a “deontologisation” of leading concepts might be undertaken, such as is familiar in Mahayana Buddhism, but which has hitherto been viewed with more caution in Christianity. These are matters for discussion by experts in the two traditions. However it would appear that an active development of ideas in these two directions would lead to a much closer mutual appreciation developing between the intellectual representatives of the two traditions. What should be noticed however is that such exchange tends also to lead to a shift in the *affective* aspect on both sides. That is to say, people can begin to *feel* differently about the symbolic systems with which they are familiar. The participants are then somehow involved with their own “religiosity” as the psychologists like to call it.

But what about the other aspects? What about entering into a dialogue of behaviour or behaviours, or a dialogue of socio-institutional relationships? This of course is not easy, though the history of religious dialogues is full of examples. Some things have often seemed to be possible, like joint meditation between Zen

Buddhists and Catholics, but others not, like joint recitation of the *nenbutsu* or joint participation in a eucharistic service. One of the regular practices carried out at the Higashi Honganji by the believers (*monto*) is a cleaning programme, understood to be a religious activity expressing gratitude. As an example of dialogue “by doing” it might be conceivable for a group of believers from the German Protestant church to visit Japan and assist in this activity! That would represent, in dialogue, the aspect of religious behaviour.

These of course are only illustrations. The main, underlying point is that in so far as the scientific study of religion seeks a balanced view of the phenomena under study by taking account of each of the four main aspects, then the same stable view may be used as a resource and as a corrective in the planning of religious dialogues. Of course, such a complex pattern of dialogue would involve many more uncertainties for the participants, who may prefer to shelter behind the more traditional exchange of conceptual systems alone.

Conclusion

The subject of religious dialogues has been approached above from the perspective of the study of religions, and the opportunity has been taken to make various suggestions. While there is a need to distinguish clearly between the study of religions and the actual carrying out of religious dialogues, there seem to be many ways in which the former can be of assistance for the latter. Those who represent religious traditions in dialogue situations should therefore take account of the theoretical perspectives and normal tasks of the study of religions. They may even wish to contribute to its further development. Specialists in the study of religions, for their part, should feel free to participate in contemporary discussions, provided that they maintain a clear view of the academic discipline for which they are responsible.

The common point of all the examples mentioned above is that specialists in the study of religions play an assistive or mediatory role, the value of which has also been recognised by the other, religious participants. The structures described have been tested, and they can be recommended. Of course the specific subject matter or behavioural focus of any encounters may be quite varied. For example, such dialogues could also focus on questions relating to peace, and indeed this can only be repeatedly recommended in our troubled times.

Diagram 1: Flow-chart illustrating the section entitled “a shared presuppositon”, above:

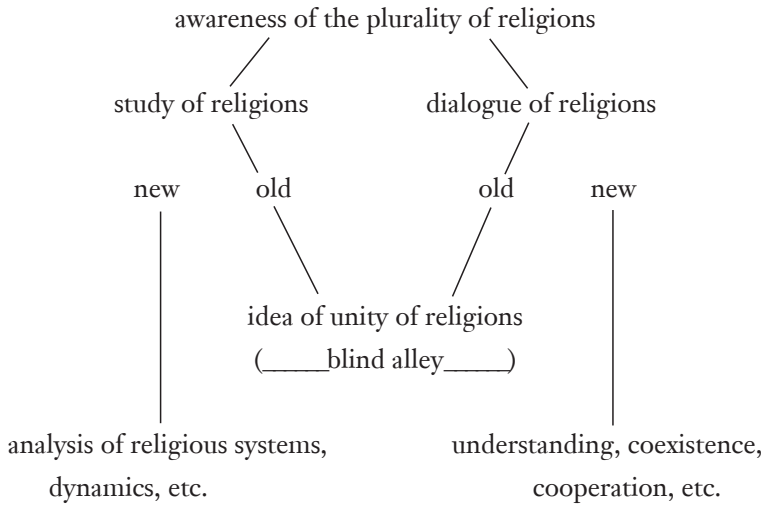
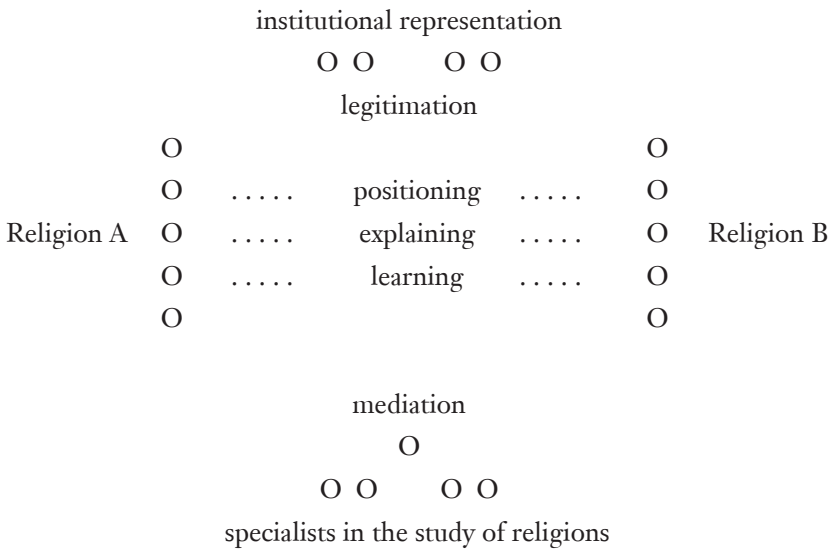


Diagram 2: Dialogue with structured institutional participation



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