

Ján MIHÁLIK

Three Intrareligious Challenges to Interreligious Dialogue

In spite of many problems and difficulties, people have already got used to terms such as ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. There are individuals, groups and even whole organisations which address these issues. The prominent representatives of particular religions are involved and they belong often among the most dedicated supporters of dialogue. However, there are inevitable conditions for dialogue to happen. If the conditions are not present, genuine dialogue is emptying and fading. Let us think for a while about one of the conditions for good interreligious relationships, the readiness of an actor for dialogue.

Starting Points

The situation of relationships of religions is a conflict situation. There are certain parties which are arguing about beliefs, values, history or followers. I will try to explain this situation as a conflict better, define it and think about it. The starting points of my considerations are four values and theses that I consider to be axiomatically given. I am not questioning them in this paper.

Religion as spiritual, psychological, social and cultural phenomenon is neutral as such. It is neither the “opium of humankind,” nor “the salvation of the nation,” but it could be both under some conditions.

Religion, because of some more or less mysterious reasons, is for humankind a natural and to some extent inevitable phenomenon. It does not disappear into history. It just transforms itself.

I am confident that non-violent conflict resolution is more meaningful and better for concerned parties in the long term than violent resolutions.

Collision and confrontation of various religious streams and beliefs is inevitable. It is impossible to exist in total isolation in the present day, to have one’s own territory without intervention from “outside”.

Why a Conflict?

The word *conflict* is a “violated” word. Our culture conditions us to have mainly negative associations about it, and we connect it with our worst life experiences. I follow a group of scholars who try to reverse this “violation of word”.

I understand conflict as a natural part of social life. Conflict is not negative or positive as such, although it is accompanied by negative feelings from possible danger and risk that individual parties of the conflict are undergoing.

The positive or negative thing in relation to conflict is the means by which we approach it and try to solve it. The question is whether this approach leads to destruction, to the end of a good relationship or violence; or whether it leads to a constructive solution, to a mutually beneficial agreement, a new quality of relationship and a new knowledge.

Conflict is a complex phenomenon. Its formation is influenced by many factors: the number of parties, the content of argument, the history of the relationship, the emotions in the situation, and the personalities concerned.

Certain factors are more significant and determining in some conflicts than in others. Religion is one of these factors, and it influences the formation of the majority of conflicts to some extent.

This happens through various dimensions of the phenomenon of religion. Conflict is influenced through the lifestyle and attitudes of the parties, and lifestyle and attitudes are certainly formed also by religion.

The conflict can be influenced by preference for a particular solution, which is determined by religious belief. Or the position and role of religion and religious organisations in society influence the way a conflict is perceived and approached.

We often use the term “religious conflict” without any exact definition nowadays. The term with its unclear meaning rules more in the world of journalism than in science. Anyway, it might help us to target better the area of our interest.

Under the words “religious conflict,” I understand such kinds of conflict in which religion constitutes one of the most determining factors through some of its dimensions. It either creates the core content of conflict (religious conflict in the narrow sense of the word); and/or religious belief and religious identity of one of the parties is one of the main reasons for the appearance or escalation of conflict (religious conflict in the broader sense of the word).

Thus we can consider the situation of the split of Christianity and the formation of Protestantism as a branch of Christianity to be religious conflict where partially teaching (theological questions) formed the core of the conflict.

Similarly, we can consider as religious conflict also the relationship between Irish separatists and unionists, which does not have any religious content (they are not arguing directly about Mary’s virginity or the pope’s leading position) but has a strong religious context. Religious identities of groups in conflict are involved and they grow up from specific religious beliefs and history.

Contrary to a religious conflict, where the formation of conflict is coupled with religion, there is one more option, which I call “religion in conflict”. Religion is not the major determining factor in conflict formation in this case. Based on the mission of religion, its followers step into a conflict as an independent party (sometimes also called a third party). In the broader sense, the place of religion in conflicts rests also in prevention of conflicts and their escalation through education and formative influence.

Religious Peace

There are various groups and organizations nowadays that are striving for peace and non-violence. Some of them do it explicitly and consciously, many of them through their professional efforts; while others work indirectly through different services, personal relationships, and participation in the life of the community.

The goal of peaceful cohabitation in the world is impossible to achieve without taking into account religion as an important element that forms the thinking and behaviour of people. The history of religions has often been very violent and xenophobic. That is why I consider the process of liberation from these violent and hateful tendencies to be very important. This process cannot be imposed from outside. It is something that each religious system has to deal with on its own.

It is important to clarify my way of using the term “peace” in this context. We usually define peace as the opposite of war. It is the time when there is no war. In a broader sense, we understand it as state where violence is not present.

This is a negative understanding of peace. I try to find a positive definition of peace, following the endeavour of other scholars. For the purpose of this paper I am working with definitions and thoughts by Johan GALTUNG, Kai F. BRAND-JACOBSEN and Jorgen JOHANSEN.

These authors talk about peace as a means of approaching conflicts. Peace is not the final state; peace is a capacity. It is the readiness in society to solve conflicts with empathy, non-violence and creativity.

I tend to speak about “religious peace” in connection with religion. I do not understand by this term a static coexistence of various religious systems and groups which are passively tolerating one another in the frame of some secular liberal state system.

Rather, I imagine it as interplay of dynamic relationships of groups and individuals claiming to follow various religions, who are solving naturally existing conflicts between them in a non-violent way.

They do not build boundaries to their personal seeking of transcendent truth because of their own religious system with absolute elimination of any influences from “outside.” They are joining a prudent dialogue with surrounding systems.

These participants are able to look for truth more easily in this dialogue without losing their own identities or without the necessity to make compromises in the key points of their religious beliefs.

Dialogue (paradoxically) leads them to a deepened knowledge of their own beliefs and at the same time it brings a new configuration of relationships and knowledge. This new configuration makes it possible to transform old conflicts.

Intrareligious Dialogue

We have shown that interreligious relationships are a kind of conflict. Representatives of religions (not only official representatives but also individual believers, or whole structures and organisations) take various roles and positions in this conflict.

Their behaviour is not dependent only on the overall situation or external influences. The inner order and positions of religions determine their external relations as well. If we want to predict the way of handling a conflict with another system by a denomination or by a certain religious group, we should have a look at some things in its inner structure.

I concentrate on three areas in this short paper: What do they believe in? What do they think of others? Where do they “place the borders”? The configuration and extent of inner unity in these three dimensions extensively determines the ability to enter into true dialogue with the external world.

The state in each of the dimensions is not constant. It undergoes development, changes of opinion and reinterpretation of tradi-

tion. We can find many examples of changes in “attitude constellations” of a religious organisation towards the external environment in history. This fact gives us hope that impassable ways in present days can bring unexpected possibilities in the future.

What Do They Believe In?

One of the most common reservations is that religions have violence “built into” in them. Religions based on sacred scriptures have a lot of bloody stories and narrations about hatred and fights.

According to these, each believer who really holds onto the basis of her or his belief has to be more closed and resistant to the world and the environment. She or he lives in the world of her or his belief with the tendency to enforce it even at the price of violence.

This makes her or him unable to conduct a true dialogue, in which the opposite side is considered as a partner and not as “uninformed and impoverished”. In reality the situation is different.

We can hear about many believers whose attitudes do not match up with the previous speculation. It is difficult to find somebody who would question the sincerity and deepness of religious belief of Mohandas K. GHANDI, Mother Theresa or the present Dalai Lama.

In spite of that, they do not belong among exemplary xenophobes, malicious people or those who do not understand the world around them. And surely they do not belong to objectors of interreligious dialogue.

On the contrary, they were many times propagators of this dialogue. How is it possible that the strengthening of religious belief and spiritual life leads many of their mates in belief to fundamentalism? Why have not they fallen into a similar trap?

This paradox of strengthening religious belief still has not been analysed, investigated and explained enough. But one thing is sure: strengthening belief does not automatically mean withdrawing from the environment and stepping out of serious dialogue.

Johan GALTUNG has indirectly offered one possible partial explanation of this phenomenon. In his essay¹, presented at an UNESCO conference in 1994 in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain, he offered a hypothesis.

According to him, each religion has its own hard and soft elements. Enforcement and fixation of hard elements leads believers to the perception of their faith as exclusive truth and themselves as an elite of chosen people.

¹ GALTUNG Johan, *Religion, Hard and Soft*. www.aril.org/galtung.htm.

Hard elements feed many times bureaucracy and lifeless strictness of religious organisations, or on the other hand fanaticism and exclusiveness of groups and individuals. Contrariwise, soft elements place “love over law”. GALTUNG also offered a few examples of hard and soft elements:

It can easily happen that a believer or a theologian would have a strange feeling while having a look at the table. We do not ask in the table what is true. We are just trying to track the “measure of social hardness” which individual religions contain.

For example, belief that God is only one and somewhere “above” us, can lead to an image of a Monarch whom we have to serve. At the same time, strictly holding onto this idea leads to condemnation of gods of different religions as long as God is only One and then our One is the True One.

On contrary, belief that God is in each person can lead to “social softness”: an openness to people without elitism and superiority. Similarly, teachings claiming universal validity lead people more easily to violent presentations of their teachings than ones claiming only local validity.

In this way we can easily (and partly mistakenly) come to the conclusion that pantheistic, polytheistic or non-theistic, pluralistic and particularistic religions (as in some aspects Buddhism or Shinto) have more predispositions towards peaceful life than monotheistic, singularist and universalist religions (as Christianity or Islam).

In reality each religion has both types of elements. Each religion creates certain boundaries and barriers in the effort to give evidence to the Truth. Hard elements make the space for mutual respect and dialogue narrower, so long as they are not balanced by soft elements.

From this point of view, the phenomenon called religious fundamentalism (in the negative sense of word) means inflexible adhesion to the hard elements at the (sometimes tragic) expense of the soft ones.

Hard	Soft
God is transcendent and above	God is immanent and inside
God has Chosen People	People have Chosen God(s)
There is a Satan below	There is no Satan
Satan has Chosen People	People have Chosen Satan(s)
Monotheism – Unitarian	Polytheism – Trinitarian, Quaternarian etc.
Monism	Dualism
Universalism and Singularism	Particularism and Pluralism
State has Chosen Religion	Religion has no Chosen State

It would be good to have a better look at the maturing processes of these elements in some research. At this point I can offer only my assumption that each religion at its “birth” already included both kinds of elements.

The general tendency of “institutionalised religion” is to come out with hard elements at first, which in a long and slow confrontation with surrounding world make the religious system to look for its soft elements, or at least softer interpretations of hard elements.

Coexistence with other systems is enabled by that and thus also the survival of the religious system itself. Certainly it is utmostly necessary to explore this hypothesis more carefully and to verify it.² Religions indeed need to mature to be able to enter dialogue.

What Do They Think of Others?

The second dimension which fundamentally influences readiness for dialogue is the opinion about other religions – and thus about one’s own religion – in relation to its truthfulness and salvific efficacy.

Douglas PRATT³ distinguishes three basic paradigms through which religions look on each other: exclusivism (my religion as the only one true); inclusivism (my religion as the only one fully true); and pluralism (my religion as equally true).

Exclusivism identifies one’s own religion (or a specific form of religion) with the essence of universal religion. Thus it refuses the claim of another religion on truth. In spite of that it happens that exclusivists enter into dialogue, but their contribution often undermines the overall efforts.

Exclusivism appears in two forms: closed and open. *Closed* exclusivism refuses *a priori* existence of a different true religion. *Open* exclusivism joins dialogue, but the basic idea is more to make capitulation possible for the others (*metanoia*, conversion or “coming home”) than to really hold a dialogue.

Inclusivism, similarly to exclusivism, claims the whole truth-value of its own religion, but it leaves some space to other religions, which in various forms (unconsciously or implicitly) take part in full truth.

2 I consider mainly an image of a relatively stable religion in this part. The aforementioned thesis obviously comes to problems with unstable religious systems, as for example New Age and similar ones. Some of them have very unclear and changeable teachings. It seems that a certain experience is more important for them than the definition of concrete truth, as it was often in cases of older religions. Thus it is very difficult to talk about hard and soft elements of “unstable religions”, because these features are connected mainly to teachings.

3 PRATT Douglas, *Contextual Paradigms for Interfaith Dialogue. Current Dialogue*, 2003/42. <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/cd42-02.html>. The whole part *What Do They Think of Others?* derives from this paper.

We can explore more forms of inclusivism. PRATT introduces three examples: gatekeeper, incognito ubiquity and imperialist.

Gatekeeper states that others have their part of truth, but the whole has truthful sense only when seen from her or his point of view. If other religions want to have real “salvific validity,” they have to enter the “gate” of inclusive religion.

Incognito ubiquity inclusivists think that other religions have partial validity as well as partial efficacy. But they are viewed just as variant and limited expressions of the universal religious Truth that is yet best expressed by their only fully true religion.

Imperialist inclusivists allow for partial truth validity and salvific efficacy in respect to other religions, but only those deemed authentic. Those are the ones which are viewed as legitimate variant realizations of the only comprehensive Right One. In general this is the view of Islam towards “religions of the Book,” i.e. Judaism and Christianity.

Pluralism asserts that various religions are equal expressions of a universal “religious reality”. This equality, however, could be understood in various contexts. *Common ground* pluralism views religious differences, or the variety of religions, as contextualised variable expressions of/from a Universal Source.

John HICK, the leading representative of this stream of thinking, talks about a “Copernican Revolution”, for it “involves a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realisation that it is God Who is at the centre.”

A similar version is *common goal* pluralism. It offers the thesis that religious differences reflect the variety of salvific paths leading, or drawn to, the Universal Goal. *Complementary holistic* pluralism assumes that religious differences may be discerned as complementary particular expressions, which together comprise the Universal Whole.

Dynamic parallel pluralism comes out of the observation that even in very different religions one can see dynamic parallel processes, rather than the same content. “Religions are not variants of the same thing, but they are variable expressions of parallel processes.”⁴

Finally, PRATT identifies *radically differentiated* pluralism. It is based on the assumption that religions are so differentiated that it is not possible to state responsibly that something is common for them. They are simply different. No one of them can be interpreted and understood correctly in terms of another religion.

I think it is not necessary to clarify more the extent of the influ-

ence of individual approaches on dialogue. All of them are pointing out the basic question we face: what is the goal of interreligious dialogue? Each paradigm has its own version of the goal.

Is it then that everyone should choose finally the only true religion? Do we want only to inform each other? Are we seeking who has the nicest labels and explanations? Or are all religions to be transformed into the mess of New Age?

It is important to say that the aforementioned paradigms undergo development. We can see it also today, when in the new context and knowledge, historically strong exclusivists become modest inclusivists. It is sometimes enough to change the terminology; in other cases it is necessary to think and research for few decades. The substantial issue is that shifts are possible in principle.

Where Do They Place the Borders?

Every relationship brings its own problems. After some time we always encounter some contradiction, difference or discordance. The third challenge for interreligious dialogue rests in the question: where do we place the borderline in the case of confrontation?

We have three basic options: we can be disregarding and we simply refuse to be concerned with the discordance; we can place the borderline – and thus the place of confrontation – outside of us; or we can run the borderline directly “through us”.

If, in our common world, I meet someone who has an absolutely different point of view on issues of crucial importance than I have, it is a great challenge. I can pretend that I do not see it and underestimate its importance. This is the strategy of those who nourish “passive tolerance”: “if they do not kill me, it does not matter.”

Or I can pretend that it is not my problem. It has to be solved elsewhere, the other must solve it: she or he has to change. It is the case of running the line of demarcation outside of me: somewhere between her or him and me.

There is one more option: to run the borderline directly through me. I can say: It is my problem, too. He has a totally different opinion, different faith, or style of living. What shall we do with that? How do I overcome the fact of being two such different people side by side? Where is the Truth that I thought was on my side?

Similarly, a religious organisation can adopt one of these attitudes. Often it is the second option. In such cases the borderline becomes the line of fighting. If not physical violence, then at least the fight of words is present. The parties are arguing, defending and contradicting; but genuine dialogue does not look like that.

⁴ Ibid.

Genuine dialogue is possible only if the parties are able to admit that the problem is their common issue. It means to admit that they both have some uncertainties that both of them are changing and they need to clarify some things before they are able to answer the questions without hesitation.

The Czech sociologist and theologian Tomas HALIK speaks about boundaries between faithful and unfaithful in a similar way: “The dividing line between those who believe and those who do not passes through the heart of everyone. Faith and doubt, nay faithlessness, live in the minds of all of us. Fundamentalists are those who have not succeeded to struggle with their questions in their own mind and thus they project them onto the others: they are able to fight them there.”⁵

We have shown three dimensions and challenges to interreligious dialogue. Without self-reflection and inner maturing of every religion, it will not be possible to enter into genuine dialogue. Dialogue needs certain conditions, and the specific maturity of involved parties is one of them.

If we have inner disturbances and discordance in some questions, we will not be able to speak about them calmly and openly with the others. If we do not know our own possibilities and options, we cannot use them creatively to fill the gaps which separate us from the others. One of the key starting points for anybody who is involved in resolution of religious conflicts is the stimulation of healthy intrareligious dialogue.

Suggested Reading

APPLEBY R. Scott, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*. 2000.

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Ján MIHÁLIK works for Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia as consultant and trainer in the fields of NGO management, youth work and youth policy, and religion and peacemaking. He has an academic background in social work and social development practice. Prior to joining Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia, he was executive director and later president of DOMKA – Association of Salesian Youth, which is one of the biggest Slovak youth organisations. He is Roman Catholic. His email address is mihalik@pdcs.sk.

5 KOLKOVÁ Terezia, *Boh miluje zápasníkov* (God loves the fighters). *Zrno*, 2004/25.