

## CHAPTER 1

# The History of Inter-Religious Dialogue

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The world has always needed dialogue, but after the 1989 “Fall of the Wall,” and even more after 9/11, the world increasingly *realizes* that it needs dialogue. At the heart of dialogue is inter-religious dialogue, because religion is the most comprehensive of all the human “disciplines”: “an explanation of the *ultimate* meaning of life, and how to live accordingly” (Swidler and Mojzes 2000). Until the slow emergence of inter-religious dialogue out of Modernity, out of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment of the West, religion was also the most absolutist, exclusivist of all the disciplines. Thus, dialogue – fundamentally meaning “I can learn from you” – is a dagger pointed at the heart of absolutist religion/ideology. But, let’s start briefly at the beginning.

As long as there has been *Homo sapiens sapiens* (perhaps since 70,000 BCE.) there have been attempts – however meager – to explain “the ultimate meaning of life and how to live accordingly”: religions. When small groups of humans gathered into large enough collectivities to form cities, each of these civilizations had at its heart a religion which both shaped and expressed that civilization. All of these ancient religions were “primary religions,” that is, were coterminous with the civilization or “state”; for instance, all members of the Israelite “nation,” and only they, were devotees of the Israelite religion.

That began to change drastically in the four ancient civilizations of Greece, Israel, India, China during the Axial Age (800–200 BCE). A shift occurred whereby some individuals began to identify no longer primarily with the collective, but with the personal conscience, to focus no longer primarily on the exterior, but on the interior. These religions increasingly tended to claim not just particularist but universal validity, that is, not just for, for instance, Athenians, but for all humans – which gave rise to religious absolutism. Still, the link between the state and religion remained strong, for as the state expanded the religion also tended to expand; and conquered peoples tended eventually to adopt the religion of the victors. For example, as the Christian, or later Muslim, armies were victorious, so too Christianity and Islam spread. Hence, the

universalist claims of Axial and post-Axial religions led to at times peaceful, but also bellicose encounters among the various religions, with the latter by far dominating. There were occasional leading devotees of such religions who stand out as models of irenicism, like Ashoka the Great (304–232 BCE), the quasi-Buddhist Emperor of India, St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226 CE), Akbar the Great, Muslim Emperor of India (1542–1605 CE). Their peaceful impacts on inter-religious relations were, however, limited, geographically and in other ways, and inter-religious encounters during the subsequent age of European exploration and colonization were marked primarily by proselytization.

This slowly began to change, though at first not noticeably, with the rise of Modernity and the Enlightenment, which was characterized by freedom, reason, history, and later dialogue (Swidler 2011). The Enlightenment put forth a breakthrough thesis: at the heart of being human is freedom and rationality, and to that was added by the Late Enlightenment (German scholars write of *die Spät Aufklärung*) a sense of history and dynamism. Embedded in the clarion call written in 1776 in Philadelphia (Greek: Brotherly/Sisterly Love), “All men are created equal” was the soft whisper, “therefore dialogue.” It became a public voice at the inter-religious encounter of the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago.

## The Christian Ecumenical Movement

Before directing our attention to the turning point of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, I would like to draw attention to a slightly later development that provided a solid underpinning for the expansion of inter-religious dialogue subsequent to the parliament. I am referring to the launching of the Christian Ecumenical Movement in 1910 in Edinburgh.

As a delegate to the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Bishop Charles H. Brent, a Missionary Episcopal Bishop in the Philippines, felt there was a need to discuss the questions of faith and ecclesiastical order deliberately excluded from the conference. Speaking from the floor, he announced his intention to found an organization for that purpose (eventually the Movement for Faith and Order) (Michael 1958: 21).

In the following fall, Bishop Brent addressed the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States, telling the members about the Edinburgh Conference and urging them to take the lead in founding a Conference on Faith and Order. As a consequence, a committee was appointed. The response was extraordinarily favorable throughout the United States and other parts of the world. Even the response of the Vatican was very sympathetic, though indefinite. However, the plans were almost completely disrupted by the outbreak of the First World War (Sasse 1929: 5). Immediately after the war, in the spring of 1919, a deputation from the American Episcopal Church Commission left on a European trip in an attempt to contact the leaders of the Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, and a date for the first World Conference of the Movement for Faith and Order was set for August 3, 1927, when 394 representatives from 108 Protestant and Orthodox Churches met in Lausanne, Switzerland (Tatlow 1954: 409–419).

Almost simultaneously a parallel effort was playing out. The genesis of the second large ecumenical organization, the Movement for Life and Work, was intimately bound up with the First World War, and the World Alliance of Churches for Promoting International Friendship, which was launched by the Protestant Churches early in 1914 as war was looming. The leader of both the Alliance and the Movement for Life and Work was the Lutheran Archbishop of Uppsala, Nathan Söderblom. He maintained that a common organ of expression was necessary for the churches, and that its formation could not wait until they had achieved unity on matters of faith and order. This was shown by the helplessness of the churches during the crisis of the war. "We cannot afford to remain separated and in a state of unnecessary impotence caused by our separation, up to the time when we shall be truly united in faith and Church organization" (Söderblom 1923: 1). This Ecumenical Council would not encroach on the independence of the churches and would deal, not with matters of faith and order, but with social and international problems. As the planning committee of Life and Work expressed it in 1922, "Doctrine divides, but service unites" (Kalstroem: 540). The first international conference of Life and Work was held in Stockholm on August 19, 1925.

In the wake of these two huge ecumenical gatherings, the sentiment arose that they themselves needed an "ecumenical movement" to unify them. Plans were then eventually made to allow the second meetings of the two organizations to take place very near each other in time and place so that many delegates could attend both. This happened in the summer of 1937 in Oxford and Edinburgh. The two organizations each voted to merge, and joint committees were set up. The newly formed joint organization, named the World Council of Churches, was to have its first world conference in 1941, but, as in 1914, when the outbreak of war prevented the launch of the Movement for Faith and Order, so the formal coming into existence of the World Council of Churches was postponed by war; it had to wait until 1948, in Amsterdam.

Protestant leaders tried mightily to include the Catholic Church in their efforts toward Christian unity. However, the Pope's own words in the early 1920s made it extremely clear that he had no intention of participating in ecumenical organizations. "Therefore, worthy brethren, it is clear why this Apostolic See never allows its own members to take part in the conferences of non-Catholic Christians. One may foster the reunion of Christians only insofar as one fosters the return of those standing outside to the one true Church from which they once unfortunately separated themselves" (Pius XI 1928: 58). Similar attitudes persisted in the Vatican for the next 40 years, repeatedly forbidding Catholic participation in dialogue (e.g., 1928 *Mortalium animos*; 1948 *Monitum*; 1949 *Instructio*; 1954 barring of Catholics at the Evanston World Council of Churches World Assembly). Clearly, the repeated Vatican condemnations were actually in reaction to the rising Catholic interest and participation in ecumenical dialogue – most notably through the *Una Sancta Movement*, starting in Germany after World War I (1914–18), expanding under Nazi oppression, and becoming a popular movement after World War II (1935–45) (see Swidler, 1966).

Why spend so much time reviewing the intra-Christian ecumenical movement when laying out the development of inter-religious dialogue? Inter-religious dialogue as it is now understood in each of its three primary modes – that is, reaching out to learn from

other religions/ideologies more fully the meaning of life (Dialogue of the Head); joining with the Other to make the world a better place in which to live (Dialogue of the Hands); and an awe-filled embrace of the inner spirit and aesthetic expressions of the Other (Dialogue of the Heart) – grew out of the Enlightenment West, former Christendom. It is this magnetic lodestone that has been drawing the rest of the globe into its paradigm shift. It first drew splintered Christianity into its orbit, moving it to a search for greater unity in response to the ever-expanding intellectual challenge of the Enlightenment and its spun-off new scholarly disciplines: scientific history, sociology, anthropology, psychology. The growing Enlightenment moved on to begin to pull all the religions/ideologies of the world into its growing “Field of Force,” eventually ushering in by the latter part of the twentieth century the Age of Global Dialogue. Hence, it is vital to see some of the historical context whence this incredible world-changing global force derived.

## The Move to Dialogue with Other Religions

As noted above, we can date the “public” launching of modern inter-religious dialogue to the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago (Barrows 1893). It was by far the most prominent gathering at the Columbian World Exhibition celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of America. What is stated about the parliament’s importance is accurate: “Today it is recognized as the occasion of the birth of formal inter-religious dialogue worldwide.”<sup>1</sup> The “trigger” of the positive explosion of inter-religious dialogue at the parliament was provided by the Indian Hindu Swami Vivekananda. He began his address: “‘Sisters and brothers of America!’ To these words he got a standing ovation from a crowd of seven thousand, which lasted for two minutes” (Bhuyan 2005: 5). Though Vivekananda was a devotee of a particular branch of Hinduism (Advaita Vedanta), he was not on a conversion trip to America. His aim clearly was dialogic in the modern sense: “‘I do not come,’ said Swamiji on one occasion in America, ‘to convert you to a new belief. I want you to keep your own belief; I want to make the Methodist a better Methodist; the Presbyterian a better Presbyterian; the Unitarian a better Unitarian. I want to teach you to live the truth, to reveal the light within your own soul’” (Vivekananda). A number of other well-known religious leaders also participated in the parliament, including Virchand Gandhi, a Jain scholar from India, Anagarika Dharmapala from Sri Lanka representing Theravada Buddhism, and D.T. Suzuki from Japan representing Zen Buddhism. They and many other religious teachers and leaders toured or taught in the West for years, spreading their teachings, gaining new followers in some instances, and promoting a new openness to other religions.

The *fin de siècle* parliament, massively reinforced by the subsequent inflow of the intra-Christian Ecumenical Movement at the beginning of the new century described earlier, opened the dam for the dialogue among the religions of the world. From this point forward only the outstanding events that most recognize as major markers in the development of inter-religious dialogue can be, albeit all too briefly, discussed. Since, as it happened, I personally “stumbled” into the “dialogue” in the middle of the twentieth

century and was carried along with the expanding dialogic flood tide, I will now largely use my own direct experience as the “thread” with which to follow developments in inter-religious dialogue from the middle of the last century onward.

The first half of the twentieth century had seen a huge global Armageddon conflict in two stages referred to as the First and Second World Wars. Following the Second World War, with the beginning of the “Long Peace,” (Pinker 2011) most Protestant and Orthodox Churches were finally able to gather together in the World Council of Churches in 1948. However, as noted above, the great majority of Christians – Catholics – remained mired in isolation through the next decade and a half. Individual Catholic thinkers, and larger efforts like the German *Una Sancta* movement, nevertheless persisted against Vatican condemnations and silencings. Then suddenly, seemingly miraculously, the elderly Cardinal Angelo Roncalli was elected as a “safe interim” pope, (Saint) John XXIII. Shortly after his installation he called together the Cardinals in Rome and announced “I had a dream” (before Martin Luther King) in which he went around the Vatican throwing open the windows. He announced that he was calling a new Ecumenical Council (Vatican II) to follow the “signs of the times,” as he put it, to “bring the Catholic Church up to date (*aggiornamento*)” so it could engage in dialogue with the world.

Vatican Council II (1962–65) ushered in a revolution in the literal sense; it turned things around in many areas, including Catholic relations with non-Catholics. At the Council a “Declaration on Religious Liberty” (*Dignitatis humanae*) was passed, solemnly affirming that religious liberty was a central part of Catholic teaching (after it had been formally condemned by Pope Gregory XVI in 1832, and Pope Pius IX in 1864, as *deliramentum*, “madness”). Secondly, a “Decree on Ecumenism” (*Unitatis reintegratio*) was passed committing all Catholics to engage in dialogue: “Exhorting *all* the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism.” Not being content with this exhortation, the Catholic bishops went on to say that, “in ecumenical work, [all] Catholics must . . . make the *first approaches* toward them [non-Catholics].” In case there were some opaque minds or recalcitrant wills out there, the bishops once more made it ringingly clear that ecumenical dialogue “involves the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone, according to the talent of each” (Article 5). Thirdly, all the Catholic bishops of the world, including the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, passed a “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (*Nostra Aetate*) in which the Catholic Church “reflects at the outset what humans have in common and what tends to promote fellowship among them. All humans form but one community.”

The third paragraph of *Nostra aetate* expressed with such clarity the human search for meaning that it merits citation in full here:

Humans look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence. The problems that weigh heavily on the hearts of humans are the same today as in the ages past. What is the human? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behavior, and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate, and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? What happens at death? What is judgment? What follows death? And finally, what is the ultimate mystery, beyond human explanation,

which embraces our entire existence, from which we take our origin and toward which we tend?

The Declaration then drew positive practical conclusions from these questions:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for their manner of life and conduct, their precepts and doctrines . . . The Church therefore urges its members to enter with prudence and charity into dialogue and collaboration with members of other religions. . . . preserving and encouraging the moral truths found among non-Christians, as well as their social life and culture.

Further, the Catholic Church immediately acted on these words by setting up in the Vatican – and requiring every national conference of bishops around the world, and indeed, every diocese to set up – secretariats for dialogue with 1) other Christian Churches and the Jews, 2) non-Christian religions, and 3) non-believers. In 1964, even before the close of the Vatican II Council, I myself was invited to be a participant in the US Catholic-Reformed & Presbyterian Dialogue, and a little later to be a member of the US Catholic Bishops' Committee on Dialogue with the Jews.

During the Council in 1964 Pope Paul VI in his first encyclical made it clear that:

dialogue is *demand*ed nowadays. . . . It is *demand*ed by the dynamic course of action which is changing the face of modern society. It is *demand*ed by the pluralism of society, and by the maturity man has reached in this day and age. Be he religious or not, his secular education has enabled him to think and speak, and to conduct a dialogue with dignity (*Ecclesiam suam*, no. 78).

Following up on these extraordinary initiatives, shortly after the Council ended, the Vatican's Secretariat for Dialogue with Non-believers wrote that even "doctrinal dialogue should be initiated with courage and sincerity, with the greatest freedom and with reverence." It then went further to make a statement that is mind-jarring in its liberality:

Doctrinal discussion requires perceptiveness, both in honestly setting out one's own opinion and in recognizing the truth everywhere, *even if the truth demolishes one so that one is forced to reconsider one's own position, in theory and in practice, at least in part*. . . . [I]n discussion the truth will prevail by no other means than by the truth itself. Therefore, the liberty of the participants must be ensured by law and revered in practice. All Christians should do their best to promote dialogue between men of every class as a duty of fraternal charity suited to our progressive and adult age. . . . The willingness to engage in dialogue is the measure and the strength of that general renewal which must be carried out in the Church. (*Humanae personae dignitatem* II.2)

This full-bore entrance of the Catholic Church into dialogue exponentially increased the involvement of all the other Christian Churches as well as the Jews. Every Church either expanded or created new agencies to foster dialogue.



The pages of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (JES) serve as an excellent bellwether marking the progress of the Interreligious Dialogue Movement. It was in the middle of Vatican II (1964) that my wife Arlene Anderson Swidler and I launched her idea, JES, a scholarly periodical devoted to religious dialogue. The original subtitle of the journal was “Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox,” but as soon as its second year we dropped it and took on our first non-Christian Associate Editor, Rabbi Arthur Gilbert. In the next three years JES continued to expand the dialogue (adding Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist . . . Associate Editors) so that the initial dialogue among Christians quickly spread to dialogue among all religions and beyond to all ideologies, cultures, and societal institutions.

Thus, what I had started to study as a graduate student in the 1950s – the dialogue between Catholics and Protestants – naturally moved on to Jewish-Christian dialogue, then Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue, and further to dialogue with Hinduism, Buddhism . . . and even Marxism. One of the new endeavors was the launching in the 1980s of the “Third Search for the Historical Jesus” among Christian and Jewish scholars (Swidler 1988; Swidler et al. 1990) followed by my involvement in the dialogue with Buddhism, (Swidler and Fernando, 1984) and then the launching of the Christian-Confucian Dialogue, June 8–15, 1988 (Swidler et al. 2005). Then, as part of this wave, some who were involved in individual dialogues began to reflect on “dialogue” itself. As this was happening the Berlin Wall came down in November, 1989, and the Soviet Union – which everybody (including the CIA and the KGB) thought would last well into the third millennium – teetered into oblivion.

Shortly afterward, Samuel Huntington argued that the world had settled back in to a “Clash of Civilizations” (Huntington 1993, 1996). He was right. There was/is a “clash of civilizations,” but that did not, and does not, describe the entire contemporary global scene. The world also dramatically began to move into the “Age of Global Dialogue,” which my work, as just one scholar, reflected. In that same time period, between 1990 and 1992, I published twelve books dealing with inter-religious dialogue (see the reference list).

In 2007, six years after Al Qaeda’s attack on America, Islam began to join global inter-religious dialogue in a massive way. This *volte-face* is analogous to the full-force entry of the Catholic Church into inter-religious dialogue beginning with Vatican II. Positive events suddenly began to erupt exponentially. This embrace of “global inter-religious dialogue” by Islam came first from 138 Muslim scholars and religious leaders from around the world on October 13, 2007, when they issued the amazing public letter “A Common Word Between Us,” inviting Christians leaders and scholars to join with them in Dialogue (see: [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com)).<sup>2</sup>

Then, onto the stage of world inter-religious dialogue strode King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, the heart-land of Islam! Having met Pope Benedict XVI in 2007, King Abdullah launched a World Conference on Dialogue with all the religions of the world in Spain, the land of the medieval “Golden Age” of inter-religious dialogue – Convivencia – on July 16–18, 2008 ([www.saudi-us-relations.org/articles/2008/loi/080719-madrid-declaration.html](http://www.saudi-us-relations.org/articles/2008/loi/080719-madrid-declaration.html)). Further, King Abdullah supported, and even lent his name, to the establishment of the King Abdullah Center for the Study of Contemporary Islam and the Dialogue of Civilizations within Imam University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The very name sends a loud and clear message, that if you wish to be a serious Muslim in the

contemporary world, you need to be involved in dialogue with the other civilizations of the world. As an initial down-payment on that pledge, in 2009 the King Abdullah Center sent fourteen professors of Islamics from Imam University to study dialogue and democracy with the Dialogue Institute: inter-religious, intercultural, international (DI is the outreach arm of JES). In March, 2011, I lectured at Baku, Azerbaijan, Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Beirut, Lebanon, establishing new “Dialogue Institutes” in each place, as well as one in Kinshasa, Congo, as part of the expanding Dialogue Institutes Network – DIN – linked to DI/JES (<http://institute.jesdialogue.org/programs/network>).

There are, of course, now vastly many more instances of Muslim involvement in dialogue around the world. Contrast this with the fact that the ten Muslim scholars whom I and Gene Fisher were able to gather for the International Scholars Annual Dialogue (ISAT), starting in 1978 and still running, could not find any kindred-spirit Muslims worldwide, until 2007. This burgeoning of inter-religious, interideological dialogue around the world is engaging all the religions and ideologies. For example, the most famous of contemporary Confucian scholars, Weiming Tu, was professor at Harvard University for decades, until 2011, when he was brought to China’s equivalent, Beijing University, to start the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies, dedicated in a major way to the “Dialogue of Civilizations.” Even many agnostics and atheists are recognizing the importance of the exploding inter-religious dialogue and want to be part of it. Without a doubt, inter-religious, interideological dialogue has gained cultural, academic and religious relevance in a variety of ways. The plethora of bilateral dialogues among the religions of the world that has sprung up in the latter half of the twentieth century is reflected in manifold essays on these multiple dialogues in the rest of this volume, and doubtless will only increase exponentially.

## Reasons for the Rise of Dialogue

How after thousands of millennia of absolutistic exclusivism – I alone possess all the truth, and anyone who disagrees with me obviously is mistaken – did large portions of humanity start to reverse its attitude and begin to think that they could learn from each other, particularly in that hypersensitive area of religion? Why did humanity begin in the last hundred years or so to reach out in dialogue?

Of course there are circumstantial reasons why dialogue is becoming more and more important today as world travel has been expanding massively. But there are also numerous internal reasons for this most radical shift. Thomas Kuhn revolutionized our understanding of the development of scientific thinking with his notion of the paradigm shift. He painstakingly showed that fundamental “paradigms” or “exemplary models” are the large thought-frames within which we place and interpret all observed data, and that scientific advancement inevitably brings about paradigm shifts – from geocentrism to heliocentrism, for example, or from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics, which are always vigorously resisted at first but finally prevail (Kuhn 1970).



Since the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, Christendom has been undergoing a major epistemological paradigm shift in how we humans understand our process of understanding and what meaning and status we attribute to “truth,” that is, our epistemology. This new epistemological paradigm is increasingly determining how we perceive, conceive, think about, and subsequently decide and act in the world. Whereas the Western notion of truth was largely absolute, static, and monologic or exclusive up to the eighteenth/nineteenth-centuries Enlightenment, it has since become deabsolutized, dynamic, and dialogic – in a word, it has become “relational.” Already two millennia and more ago some Hindu and Buddhist thinkers held a nonabsolutistic epistemology, but that fact had no significant impact on the West owing to the relative cultural eclipse of those civilizations in the early modern period and the dominance of the Western scientific worldview. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, Eastern thought has become increasingly well-known in the West, and proportionately influential. This knowledge and influence appears to be increasing geometrically in recent decades. This “new” view of truth came about in at least six different, but closely related, ways. In brief they are historicism, intentionality, sociology of knowledge, limits of language, hermeneutics and dialogue.

### *Historicism*

Before the nineteenth century in Europe truth, that is, *a statement about reality*, was conceived in quite an absolute, static, exclusivistic either-or manner. If something was true at one time, it was always true; not only empirical facts but also the meaning of things or the ought-ness that was said to flow from them were thought of in this way. At bottom, the notion of truth was based exclusively on the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction: a thing could not be true and not true in the same way at the same time. Truth was defined by way of exclusion; A was A because it could be shown not to be not-A. Truth was thus understood to be absolute, static, exclusivistically either-or. This is a *classicist* or *absolutist* view of truth.

In the nineteenth century many scholars came to perceive all statements about the truth of the meaning of something as partially the products of their historical circumstances. Those concrete circumstances helped determine the fact that the statement under study was even called forth, that it was couched in particular intellectual categories (for example, abstract Platonic, or concrete legal, language), in particular literary forms (for example, mythic or metaphysical language), and in particular psychological settings (for example, a polemic response to a specific attack). These scholars argued that only if the truth statements were placed in their historical situation, their historical *Sitz im Leben*, could they be properly understood. The understanding of the text could be found only in *context*. To express that same original meaning in a later *Sitz im Leben* one would require a proportionately different statement. Thus, all statements about the meaning of things were now seen to be deabsolutized in terms of time. This is a *historical* view of truth. Clearly at its heart is a notion of *relationality*: any statement about the truth of the meaning of something has to be understood in *relationship* to its historical context.

### *Intentionality*

Later thinkers like Max Scheler (1874–1928) added a corollary to this historicizing of knowledge; it concerned not the past but the future. Such scholars also saw truth as having an element of intentionality at its base, as being oriented ultimately toward action, praxis. They argued that we perceive certain things as questions to be answered, and that we set goals to pursue specific knowledge because we wish to do something about those matters; we intend to live according to the truth and meaning that we hope to discern in the answers to the questions we pose, in the knowledge we decide to seek. The truth of the meaning of things was thus seen as de-absolutized by the action-oriented intentionality of the thinker-speaker. This is an *intentional* or *praxis* view of truth, and it too is basically *relational*: a statement has to be understood in *relationship* to the action-oriented intention of the speaker.

### *The sociology of knowledge*

Just as statements of truth about the meaning of things were seen by some thinkers to be historically deabsolutized in time, so too, starting in the twentieth century with scholars like Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), such statements began to be seen as deabsolutized by such things as the culture, class, and gender of the thinker-speaker, regardless of time. All reality was said to be perceived from the perspective of the perceiver's own world view. Any statement of the truth of the meaning of something was seen to be perspectival, "standpoint-bound," *standort-gebunden*, as Karl Mannheim put it, and thus deabsolutized. This is a *perspectival* view of truth and is likewise *relational*: all statements are fundamentally *related* to the standpoint of the speaker.

### *The limitations of language*

Following Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and others, many thinkers have come to see that any statement about the truth of things can be at most only a partial description of the reality it is trying to describe. Although reality can be seen from an almost limitless number of perspectives, human language can express things from only one perspective at once. If we ask a question in legal thought-categories, for example, we will naturally receive answers in legal categories, which will not necessarily answer questions of ethics, or of empirical reality. Further, when we are dealing with religious questions, the very fact of dealing with the truth of the "meaning" of something indicates that the knower is essentially involved, and hence reflects the perspectival character of all such statements. A statement may be true, of course – it may accurately describe the extramental reality it refers to – but it will always be cast in particular thought-categories, language, concerns, etc., of a particular "standpoint," and in that sense will be limited, deabsolutized. This is a *perspectival* view of truth, and therefore also *relational*. This limited and limiting, as well as liberating, quality of language is especially clear in talk of the transcendent. the transcendent is by definition that which goes beyond our experience.

Any statements about the transcendent must thus be de-absolutized and limited far beyond the perspectival character seen in ordinary statements.

### *Hermeneutics*

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984), and Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) recently led the way in developing the science of hermeneutics, which, by arguing that all knowledge of a text is at the same time an *interpretation* of the text, further de-absolutizes claims about the “true” meaning of the text. But this basic insight goes beyond knowledge of texts and applies to all knowledge. When I come to know something the object comes into me in a certain way, i.e. through the lens that I use to perceive it. This is an *interpretive* view of truth. It is clear that *relationality* pervades this hermeneutical, interpretative, view of truth.

### *Dialogue*

A further development of this basic insight is that I learn not by being merely passively open or receptive to, but in dialogue with extramental reality. I not only “hear” or receive reality, but I also – and, I think, first of all – “speak” to reality. I ask it questions, I stimulate it to speak back to me, to answer my questions. In the process I give reality the specific categories and language in which to respond. The “answers” that I receive back from reality will always be in the language, the thought-categories, of the questions I put to it. It can “speak” to me, can really communicate with my mind, only in a language and categories that I understand. When the speaking, the responding, grows less and less understandable to me, if the answers I receive are sometimes confused and unsatisfying, then I probably need to learn to speak a more appropriate language when I put questions to reality. If, for example, I ask the question, “How far is yellow?” I will receive a non-sense answer. Or if I ask questions about living things in mechanical categories, I will receive confusing and unsatisfying answers. This is a *dialogic* view of truth, whose very name reflects its *relationality*.

In sum, our understanding of truth and reality has been undergoing a radical shift. This new paradigm which is being born understands all statements about reality, especially about the meaning of things, to be historical, intentional, perspectival, partial, interpretive and dialogic. What is common to all these qualities is the notion of *relationality*, that is, that all expressions or understandings of reality are in some fundamental way *related* to the speaker or knower. It is while bearing this paradigm shift in mind that we proceed with our analysis.

### *The contribution of the “scientific” study of religion to inter-religious dialogue*

For thousands of years almost the only religion “taught” was by the adherents themselves. When for one reason or another a religion other than the “true” one was taught,

it was almost always taught by the outsider. Example: for centuries Judaism was taught to Jews by Jews, but when Judaism was taught at the University of Paris, Oxford, or Cambridge, it was taught by Christians. The same was true concerning Islam in Paris as well as concerning the teaching of Christianity at Al-Khasar in Cairo. The study of “religion” was done from the perspective of the religion of the teacher/student. Thus, there was Christian “theology,” Muslim *kalam*, etc. After the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in the West and the subsequent development of the “critical” science of history, and then the various social sciences (sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.) in the course of the nineteenth century, the “scientific” study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) was born – Max Müller (1823–1900) being recognized as its “grandfather” – in its last quarter.

The study of religion largely continued in departments of theology for the rest of the nineteenth century and more than half of the twentieth century. When religions other than the “home” religion (in the West, almost always Christianity) were studied and taught, it was almost inevitably by a Christian theologian. This began to change when Temple University became a state-related university, divested itself of its Divinity School, and established its Department of Religion in 1964 (other state universities, for example, the University of Iowa, had developed various symbioses with religious bodies in the teaching about religion). Temple University’s Department of Religion pioneered a new way to study and teach religion, namely, by gathering professors who were critical scholars of the religions they were teaching, in addition to professors whose approach was more *Religionswissenschaft*. Thus, the world’s religions were studied/taught by critical scholars who knew the religion from “the inside” and “the outside.”

One can begin here to discern the differences between the study of and teaching about religion via one of the various forms of *Religionswissenschaft* on the one hand, and, as noted above, what occurs when “religious insiders,” that is, members of two or more religions, come together primarily to learn from each other what the other thinks/does and why.

The epistemological assumption underlying dialogue is that “Nobody knows everything about anything” – which clearly includes that most complicated of all disciplines, religion. Hence, the primary aim of inter-religious dialogue is for the dialogue partners to learn something about the ultimate meaning of life that they did not know solely from their own religious perspective. Whether or not one agrees with one’s dialogue partner’s view of something, learning more about how and why she or he understands, and hence acts in, the world necessarily influences how the first partner perceives, and therefore acts in, the world. Thus, ultimately, the philosophy guiding the early stages of inter-religious dialogue can be said to be pragmatism: The participants of inter-religious dialogue were interested in what William James and other pragmatists designated the “cash value” of the ideas discussed – what difference they make in how they see life and, hence, live it.

In the higher education study of religion, inter-religious dialogue *itself* occurred, as did also the study *of* it. There are a number of philosophical, social-scientific, and religious issues that underlie inter-religious dialogue that needed to be studied in order to understand the other. The results of this study, in turn, came to significantly influence the actual dialogues that occurred, whether in a university setting or elsewhere.

Comparative religion, on the other hand, engages in a historical cross-cultural study of religious phenomena with the emphasis being on comparison. Scholars “observe similar phenomena from religions laid side by side and draw conclusions from such comparison.” (Swidler and Mojzes 2000: 135) Concepts and categories are examined for similarities and differences, at times hypothesizing about their origins – whether there was a historical connection or an independent origin of recurrent themes. Some scholars seek universal structures, while others reject this as an unwarranted imposition upon diverse religious phenomena. Comparative religion did not *per se* promote inter-religious dialogue, but insights from it came to be useful in dialogue.

Thus, comparative religion, or more broadly, *Religionswissenschaft*, made valuable contributions to the understanding of religion and the influences it has in human life. It provided extremely helpful resources for inter-religious dialogue, helping religious and nonreligious persons and groups to understand themselves and others better, and consequently to act with greater respect for one’s own religious self and that of the Other. Inter-religious dialogue came to utilize these resources from *Religionswissenschaft* and elsewhere to engage in that respectful, learning encounter with the religious Other which is the very definition of inter-religious dialogue.

## The Deepening and Expanding of Inter-Religious Dialogue

Inter-religious dialogue has not remained bilateral, or even multilateral, but has also become global. Let me mention just four examples: <http://jes/dialogue>

First, was the founding in 1970 in Kyoto, Japan, of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Conference\\_of\\_Religions\\_for\\_Peace](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Conference_of_Religions_for_Peace) – also known as Religions for Peace) by Nikkyo Niwano. It has affiliates in 75 countries around the world, and, among other activities, holds an international conference every five years. Nikkyo Niwano was also the co-founder in 1938 of a Japanese Buddhist sect, Rissho Kosei Kai, which today has 6.5 million members ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rissho\\_Kosei\\_Kai](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rissho_Kosei_Kai)). In the early 1960s Niwano met Joseph Spae, a Belgian Catholic priest scholar of Buddhism and inter-religious dialogue – he had established the Oriens Institute for Religious Research in Tokyo – who introduced him to Pope Paul VI during Vatican Council II (1962–1965). This led Niwano to focus much of his personal energy and that of Rissho Kosei Kai on inter-religious dialogue, one result of which was the launching of the WCRP (current Secretary General, William Vendley – [wvendley@wcrp.org](mailto:wvendley@wcrp.org)), and in 1976 the related Asian Conference on Religion and Peace (ACRP, [rk-world.org/acrp.aspx](http://rk-world.org/acrp.aspx)), current Secretary General, Sunggon Kim ([drkim123@yahoo.co.kr](mailto:drkim123@yahoo.co.kr)).

Second, the United Religions Initiative (URI) was launched. The charter of the organization mentions that “The idea for *URI* came to California Episcopal Bishop William Swing in 1993, after an invitation by the United Nations to host a large interfaith service in San Francisco, marking the 50th anniversary of the signing of the UN Charter. He asked himself, ‘If the nations of the world are working together for peace through the UN, then where are the world’s religions?’” ([uri.org/about\\_uri/charter](http://uri.org/about_uri/charter)). It also has affiliates in 75 countries around the world.

Third, in 1971, a year after the founding of the WCRP, Taesan (1916–1998), the second Head Dharma Master of a new sect of Buddhism founded in Korea in 1916, Won Buddhism, proposed a United Religions Organization (URO) parallel to the United Nations. Taesan’s vision was for United Religions “to develop spiritual power through the cooperation of the world religions and to promote human happiness and world peace through the balance and harmony of political power and spiritual strength.” Thus reported Rev. Dr. Bokin Kim, daughter of Master Sotaesan and President of the Won Institute of Graduate Studies ([soninstitute.edu](http://soninstitute.edu)) in Philadelphia, as well as a former doctoral student of mine at Temple University Department of Religion (Bokin Kim 2000). For a number of years in the latter part of the twentieth century URO had a representative at the UN in New York, but eventually folded its work into that of the URI.

Fourth, the launching of the Movement for a Global Ethic. In the fall of 1990, while my wife Arlene and I were teaching at Temple University Japan, my longtime friend and colleague Hans Küng sent me a copy of his new book *Projekt Weltethos* (Küng 1990). The message of the book was that the world needs a common ethical foundation. I immediately drafted an editorial for the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* and faxed it to Hans, as one of the founding Associate Editors, asking whether he wished to co-sign the editorial. The editorial argued that the next step toward realizing a global ethic was to attempt to articulate a “Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic,” analogous to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the UN, which every religious and nonreligious group and individual could, and eventually would, publicly commit to. Hans did co-sign and we published the editorial – along with simultaneous publication in various international publications, as well as Hans’s announcing it at a September, 1991 lecture at UNESCO in Paris – with the additional signatures of twenty-four more scholars from various religions.<sup>3</sup> I then brought the idea to ISAT, who asked me to consult as widely as possible and bring back to the next annual meeting a proposed draft of a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic, which I did. About the same time Hans was asked by the committee in Chicago preparing for the second Chicago Parliament of the World’s Religions to develop a similar draft of a declaration for them, which he did. It was signed by the two-hundred-plus religious leaders at the September, 1993 Chicago World Parliament, and subsequently circulated ([weltethos.org](http://weltethos.org)), as was also the one created for/at ISAT. They and other versions, as well as an extensive list of two dozen organizations and web sites fostering a global ethic, can be found at: [gloablethic.org](http://gloablethic.org). The latest Institute for World Ethics was launched as part of the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies (Director, Weiming Tu at Beijing University in relationship with the University of Tübingen, Germany, in November, 2012).

## Conclusion: The Current State of Inter-Religious Dialogue

For millennia religion was at the very heart of all human societies, but with the Enlightenment it both was driven out of, and abandoned, civil society; now it is coming back in (Micklethwait and Wooldrige 2009) – both in very destructive ways – “9/11,” Palestine–Israel, Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, Kashmer, Sudan . . . , – but also in constructive ways – the peace movement, reconciliation movements, as in South Africa, Ghandi,



Martin Luther King, and especially inter-religious dialogue. This, then, is the twenty-first-century state of inter-religious dialogue. It is no longer confined to the reservation of theological/religious reflection and cultic activity; it is moving ever more broadly and deeply and bringing religion back into all the opinion-shaping institutions of society: business, education, politics, the arts. Thus, flowing out of its dim beginning in the Enlightenment, inter-religious dialogue is now spreading in all the societal structures of the globe, moving humanity in the direction of a Global Dialogical Civilization.

## Notes

- 1 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament\\_of\\_the\\_World%E2%80%99s\\_Religions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament_of_the_World%E2%80%99s_Religions) accessed December 1, 2012.
- 2 This was quickly followed up by a major scholarly conference at Yale University, which also deliberately included Jewish scholars: "The 'Common Word' letter was drafted by Muslim leaders and addressed specifically to leaders of 'Christian churches everywhere' in order to address concrete issues and problems between Christians and Muslims. Given the extent, however, to which Jewish concerns are intertwined with those of Christians and Muslims, and given the historic Christian and Muslim tendency inappropriately to exclude the Jewish community, we are deeply committed to seeking out Jewish leaders and scholars to play a central role in the ongoing Common Word dialogue." (Saperstein et al. in Wolf et al. 2010).
- 3 Swidler and Küng (1991). The additional signatories were Mohammed Arkoun (Muslim), Julia Ching (Confucian/Catholic), John Cobb (Methodist), Kkalid Duran ((Muslim), Claude Geffré (Catholic), Irving Greenberg (Jewish), Norbert Greinacher (Catholic), Riffat Hassan (Muslim), Rivka Horwitz (Jewish), John Hick (Presbyterian), Adel Khoury (Catholic), Paul Knitter (Catholic), Karl-Josef Kuschel (Catholic), Pinchas Lapide (Jewish), Johannes Lähnenmann (Lutheran), Dietmar Mieth (Catholic), Paul Mojzes (Methodist), Jürgen Moltmann (Reformed), Fathi Osman (Muslim), Raimundo Panikkar (Hindu/Buddhist/Catholic), Daniel Polish (Jewish), Rodolfo Stavenhagen (sociologist), Theo Sundermeier (Lutheran), Knut Walf (Catholic/Taoist).

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## Organizations Promoting Inter-Religious Dialogue

The book by Heckman and Neiss, *Interactive Faith*, has a helpful listing as of 2008 of over 60 organizations dealing with inter-religious dialogue, with a brief description and website of each.

Arts & Spirituality Center: [www.artsandspirituality.org](http://www.artsandspirituality.org)  
 Beliefnet: [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com)  
 Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions: [www.cpwr.org](http://www.cpwr.org)  
 Dialogue Institute: [www.jesdialogue.org](http://www.jesdialogue.org)  
 Fellowship of Reconciliation: [www.forusa.org](http://www.forusa.org)  
 Hartford Institute for Religion Research: [www.hirr.hartsem.edu](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu)

The Interfaith Alliance: [www.interfaithalliance.org](http://www.interfaithalliance.org)  
 Interfaith Youth Core: [www.ifyc.org](http://www.ifyc.org)  
 International Association for Religious Freedom: [www.iarf.net](http://www.iarf.net)  
 North American Interfaith Network: [www.nain.org](http://www.nain.org)  
 Pluralism Project: [www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org)  
 Religions for Peace: [www.religionsforpeace.org](http://www.religionsforpeace.org)  
 Temple of Understanding: [www.templeofunderstanding.org](http://www.templeofunderstanding.org)  
 United Religions Initiative: [www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org)