

**Ingeborg Gabriel,**

**Like Rosewater:  
Reflections on Interreligious Dialogue,**

**in:**

**Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 45:1, Winter 2010,  
1-23.**

## LIKE ROSEWATER: REFLECTIONS ON INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Ingeborg Gabriel

### PRECIS

After a short introduction on the present context, the essay describes the Vienna Dialogue Initiative, which was begun in the 1970's, reflecting first on the essence of dialogue, second on its contents with regard to different religions, then in a third phase concentrating on interreligious dialogue with Islam. The rich experience from these interreligious dialogues in which the author participated over the last fifteen years serves to develop a typology that differentiates among three types of interreligious dialogue: the "dialogue of life," the dialogue of religious experience and theology, and the dialogue in ethics and law. This third type is most important for the world today. Because of the special epistemological and anthropological status of ethics, other than the dialogue on theological questions, it can lead to a consensus on those issues that are vital for a good common life on the planet.

#### *I. The Dialogical Imperative: Some Reflections on the Present Kairos*

The word "religion" etymologically derives from *religare*—to bind together. Religions thus ought to create reliable bonds between God or the divine and humans, as well as between men and women of different walks of life, nationalities, races, genders, and faiths. Any look at the present global situation,

---

Ingeborg Gabriel (Catholic) has been chair of the Dept. of Social Ethics, Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology, University of Vienna, since 1997, the first woman ever to be given a professorship in that Faculty. During 1994–97, as an associate professor, she headed the Dept. of International Ethics. She holds a Master of Social Sciences and Economics and both a master's and a Ph.D. (1989) in theology from the University of Vienna, as well as a master's in international relations from the Diplomatic Academy, Vienna. Before her academic career she worked with the U.N. Development Programme, 1976–80, in New York, Nepal, and Mongolia. She was a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Culture, Religion, and World Affairs (CURA) at Boston University (Fall, 2008). She has had wide experience in both ecumenical and interreligious dialogues in Europe and internationally. She initiated and organizes the Vienna Christian-Muslim Summer University (2006, 2008, 2010), as well as the International Vienna Conferences on Ecumenical Dialogue and Social Ethics (2005, 2007, 2009). At present she is president of the Zentrum für Ökumenische Ethik (Vienna) and vice president of the Gesellschaft der Katholischen Sozialethiker Mittel- und Osteuropas, as well as a member of the advisory board for the *Journal Inter* (*Interconfessional, Interreligious*), Cluj, Romania. She is also Director of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Austrian Bishops' Conference. Some fifty of her articles on social ethics and their application have been published in books and journals, and she has written and edited several books. Recent publications include *Perspektiven ökumenischer Sozialethik: Der Auftrag der Kirchen im größeren Europa*, 2nd ed. (Grünwald: Ostfildern, 2006); *Theologie und Politik in Europa: Ökumenische Perspektiven* (editor) (Ostfildern, 2008); and "Christianity in an Age of Uncertainty: A Catholic Perspective," in Peter L. Berger, ed., *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism: Religious Resources for a Middle Position* (Eerdmans, 2010).

however, shows that religious beliefs divide more than they unite people. This makes the question of how faith communities can further peace one of the most urgent of our time.

This essay begins with a short introduction on the characteristics of the present. I will then reflect on the Vienna Dialogue Initiative and, from this experience, develop a typology of three different forms of interreligious dialogue. In doing so I will argue that a universal ecumenism in ethics and law is possible, though not easy, because of the particular epistemological status of ethics.

Sociologists have identified a number of features that characterize the present age. With regard to the question of religion and peace, I will underscore three global megatrends: religious (and ideological) pluralism, globalization, and desecularization.<sup>1</sup> These mutually influence each other, although each of them has different origins as well as consequences for faith traditions.

Pluralism is—as Peter L. Berger argued—perhaps the distinguishing mark of modern societies. It is enhanced by a variety of factors, the most important of which is migration between countries and from the countryside to the cities. The result is that people of different religious and other backgrounds live side-by-side, with a weakening of traditional lifestyles. Pluralism also causes humans to gain greater independence from their communities and the social traditions that these consider to be valid. A similar effect is brought about by the global media, which make people aware of the existence of other values and religious beliefs. Moreover, religious pluralism is increased where religious freedom, that is, the political option to grant equal civil and legal status to all creeds, is part of the constitution of a country. Mobility, the media, and the legal equality of all faith traditions thus further religious pluralism not only in Western societies but also worldwide. As a consequence, most men and women today are actually—or at least virtually—in contact with adherents of other faiths, worldviews, and values. Pluralism, religious or otherwise, is not new in itself. However, its scope and influence have expanded greatly during past decades due to the reasons just mentioned.

The same holds true for globalization. Although there has been a worldwide transfer of goods and ideas since about the sixteenth century, its range and speed have accelerated immensely in this age. Technological innovations, particularly the computer and the internet, have created a dynamic that is transforming all areas of life around the globe. Anthony Giddens has aptly called this a “runaway world.”<sup>2</sup> Globalization also facilitates migration and the worldwide dissemination of values and ideas, scientific and otherwise. Real and virtual encounters with people from the most far-off points of the earth have become an everyday reality, permeating our worldview and influencing our decisions.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999).

<sup>2</sup>Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalisation Is Reshaping Our Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

Globalization also leads to a close interconnectedness among religions that has never existed before. It not only stimulates interest in other faiths and beliefs worldwide but also allows them mutually to influence each other, both consciously and unconsciously, both positively and negatively. It makes for new alliances as well as new polarizations between believers, between believers and secularists, and between moderates and fundamentalists within faith communities, with the last of these attempting to reestablish old borders and particularities.<sup>3</sup>

Globalization and its social countermovement, fragmentation, have had a growing effect on politics during past decades, which is associated with the third trend: desecularization. Religions were hardly present on the global public square well into the 1970's. This changed dramatically and, indeed, rather unexpectedly during the 1980's. Men and women did not necessarily become more devout from that time onward. What was new was, rather, the emergence of faith-motivated political movements that began to exert considerable influence, both nationally and later also globally. This tendency became visible for the first time in the more or less simultaneous appearance of religious groupings (1979–80) as diverse as Catholic *Solidarność* in Poland (which contributed decisively to the downfall of Communism), the Shiite movement in Iran (which led to the Islamic revolution), and the Moral Majority in the United States (through which the so-called Christian right started to intervene in politics). The appearance of religious leaders on the political scene and in the media is the visual expression of this trend. Muslim mullahs and Catholic, Orthodox, and other clergy, as well as Buddhist monks are nowadays a familiar sight on television. They do not appear in public because of their spiritual function (in which case they would remain fairly invisible) but because they promote political causes. That this is no longer surprising demonstrates the degree to which we have become accustomed to religions' being politically mobilizing forces.

Pluralism, globalization, and desecularization have become part of our lives. These world-transforming changes also make high moral demands on both religious leaders and the believers of faith communities. How they respond to this challenge is of greater importance than ever. There are basically three options in this situation. The first is to convert all other people to one's own faith or at least give them a legally or socially inferior status, which necessarily entails violence

---

<sup>3</sup>The validity of the term "fundamentalism" has been contested because of its haziness and usage as an ideological weapon. Although both claims are true, it is still a useful notion for describing a religious worldview that is intolerant and even fanatic in its praxis and exclusivist in its theory, denying other faiths any inherent value. Martin Riesebrodt defines fundamentalism as "a social and religious movement, the aim of which is to answer to a stipulated dramatic social crisis by a radical return to sacred principles, norms and laws which are thought to be eternally valid" (Martin Riesebrodt, "Was ist religiöser Fundamentalismus?" in Clemens Six, Martin Riesebrodt, and Siegfried Haas, eds., *Religiöser Fundamentalismus: Vom Kolonialismus zur Globalisierung* [Vienna: Universitätsverlag, 2005], p. 18; also see the full article, pp. 13-33). This definition stresses the inherently modern character of fundamentalism (as an answer to the crisis of modernity), as well as its fervent particularism that looks to the past for ideals and guidance.

and subjugation. The second is to withdraw into religiously homogeneous enclaves and reduce contacts with other believers to a minimum so as not to become contaminated. The first option is inhumane; the second, difficult to implement. Thus, there remains a third option: active engagement in interreligious dialogue as the only morally viable choice in the face of religious pluralism. It is the only way that contributes to peace and is in agreement with human nature, which is communicative in its essence. We can thus speak of a dialogical imperative for this age.<sup>4</sup>

The possibilities for communication as well as the intensity of global exchange have grown immensely during the past decades. However, at the same time, the realization that our world has become a community of fate has been obscured by often religiously legitimated identity politics. It is high time to change this.<sup>5</sup>

## II. The Vienna Dialogue Initiative: A Vision for Our Common Future

Before thinking about interreligious dialogue, most people practice it. The encounter with persons of other faiths and the experiences incurred in this process generally serve as the basis for their in-depth reflection. Such experience is—and this should be noted right in the beginning—always fragmentary. Nevertheless, it constitutes the praxis on which the hermeneutical process of understanding essentially depends. In what follows I would like to give an account of the Vienna Dialogue Initiative (V.D.I.), in which I participated for more than a decade and which, because of its *longue durée*, can provide valuable insights into the nature, prospects, and limits of interfaith dialogue.

As is well known, the Roman Catholic Church repositioned itself theologically with regard to other religions in *Nostra aetate*, the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions of Vatican II (1965). This change has rightly been called revolutionary. Out of it emerged a number of dialogue initiatives, which were organized “to further love and unity among the peoples of the earth” (*Nostra aetate* 1). One of these began in the 1970’s at the College of Theological Studies of the Catholic congregation *Societas Verbi Divini* in St. Gabriel, near Vienna (Mödling).<sup>6</sup> The first step was a conference reflecting on Christianity in a relig-

---

<sup>4</sup>In using this term, I refer to Peter L. Berger’s classic *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York: Doubleday, 1979). Cf. also David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

<sup>5</sup>There are, of course, also powerful social reasons that fuel these conflicts. However, from the self-perception of those involved, these are regarded as being religious and cultural. This holds true for Islamists, as well as for the Orthodox in the Balkans and in Chechnya, for Buddhist and Hindu Sri Lankans, and many others. Their social status as a suppressed minority or as a victim of hegemonical powers is thus seen through the lens of religious identity and is contested on this basis.

<sup>6</sup>The driving force behind this long-term endeavor was—as is usually the case with such initiatives—one person: Fr. Andreas Bsteh, then professor of fundamental theology at that theological

iously pluralistic world (1974), which was followed by a series of academic symposia focusing on the relationship between Christianity and Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> In the 1990's another series of academic encounters took place, which aimed at deepening the understanding of these faiths. They were—and I think rightly so—considered to be a necessary intellectual preparation for direct interreligious dialogues, since these require a fairly detailed knowledge of the other's theology, anthropology, and ethics. Because of the sheer vastness of the intellectual heritage of the major world religions, each of which constitutes a universe of its own, this was no easy task.

The theological method chosen was the formulation of central questions that the other faith traditions might pose to Christian theology. The concept was thus dialogical from the very beginning, attempting to spell out the basic contents of Christianity so that they could be understood by the believers of other religious traditions, and *vice versa*. The symposia were basically conceived as a sort of fictitious academic dialogue on central theological, anthropological, and ethical

---

college.

<sup>7</sup>The reason that Judaism was not included was that its status in Christian theology cannot be compared to that of the other religions, which is why the dialogue with it is entrusted to different institutions. The necessity and fruitfulness of such a dialogue and a theology that incorporates the Jewish roots of Christianity (and not only appeals to them) becomes clear when reading Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004). In German theology it was another priest from the same congregation and professor in Lucerne, Clemens Thoma, who acted as a pioneer in Jewish-Christian dialogue. With regard to the other three world religions—Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—the following publications have been issued in the series *Beiträge zur Religionstheologie* (Contributions to the Theology of Religions) (hereafter, BzR), all of which were edited by Andreas Bsteh: *Universales Christentum angesichts einer pluralen Welt* [Universal Christendom in the Face of a Plural World], BzR 1 (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1976); *Der Gott des Christentums und des Islams* [God in Christianity and Islam], BzR 2, 2nd ed. (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1992; Arabic ed. [Jounieh: al-Maktaba al-būlusīya, 2003]); *Erlösung in Christentum und Buddhismus* [Salvation in Christianity and Buddhism], BzR 3, 2nd ed. (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1992); *Sein als Offenbarung in Christentum und Hinduismus* [Being as Revelation in Christianity and Hinduism], BzR 4, 2nd ed. (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1992); *Dialog aus der Mitte christlicher Theologie* [Dialogue from the Core of Christian Theology], BzR 5 (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1987); *Glaube, der Begegnung sucht: Ein theologisches Programm* [Faith in the Search of Encounter: A Theological Program], BzR 6 (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1992); *Hören auf sein Wort: Der Mensch als Hörer des Wortes Gottes in christlicher und islamischer Überlieferung* [Listening to His Word: The Human as a Listener to the Word of God in Christian and Islamic Tradition], BzR 7 (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1992; Arabic ed., 2nd ed. [Jounieh: al-Maktaba al-būlusīya, 1999]); *Friede für die Menschheit: Grundlagen, Probleme und Zukunftsperspektiven aus islamischer und christlicher Sicht*, BzR 8 (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1994; E.T.—*Peace for Humanity: Principles, Problems, and Perspectives of the Future as Seen by Muslims and Christians*, 3rd ed. [New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1998]; Arabic ed., 2nd ed. [Jounieh: al-Maktaba al-būlusīya, 1998]; Urdu ed. [Lahore: Jang Publishers, 1997]); and *Eine Welt für all: Grundlagen eines gesellschaftspolitischen und kulturellen Pluralismus in christlicher und islamischer Perspektive*, BzR 9 (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1999; E.T.—*One World for All: Foundations of a Socio-Political and Cultural Pluralism from Christian and Muslim Perspectives* [New Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1999]; Arabic ed. [Jounieh: al-Maktaba al-būlusīya, 2000]; Urdu ed. [Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publishing, 2003]).