

Ingeborg Gabriel,

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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. (Grünewald: 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.¹ 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.”² 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.

¹Cf. 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).

²Anthony 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.³

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

³The 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.⁴

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.⁵

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).⁶ The first step was a conference reflecting on Christianity in a relig-

⁴In 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).

⁵There 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.

⁶The 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.⁷ 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.

⁷The 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]).

issues.⁸ For this, specialists in the respective fields were needed who at the same time were able to present their findings to an academic audience from other disciplines, which had to integrate them into their thinking. The assistance of competent scholars such as the internationally renowned German Orientalist Annetta Schimmel was invaluable for a better understanding of Islam. The same held true for the other faiths. Moreover, if these academics were not themselves believers of the religion they presented, it had to be ensured that the latter found that their beliefs had been understood correctly.

These explorations of the intellectual traditions of the world religions formed the basis for the discovery of common ground as well as for the recognition of differences among them. This endeavor proved to be as fascinating as it was demanding. It calls for an open mind and profound knowledge, in order to discard misconceptions and examine the religious beliefs and practices of others for that which unites, not what divides them. The gain from this complex process of interpretation is that it leads to better comprehension not only of the other's religious beliefs but also of one's own.

Any faith tradition incorporates universal human meaning in its creed and cult, which may be understood by every human being. Their creative interpretation, moreover, takes advantage of the fact that religious (as any other) traditions are not monolithic but pluriform and can therefore answer new demands and be transformed in new contexts. To give but one example, in order to understand what "sacrifice" means in, say, Hinduism, one has to grasp what it means for humans to sacrifice something. The concept as such is gained from one's own religious experience, which is then reflected philosophically in a second step, in which one asks how this or that phenomenon can be understood in general human terms. The theological insight into one's own belief in what "sacrifice" means is deepened and sometimes also modified by this process of reflection. It starts from one's own understanding as a basis for that of the other religion through the intermediary of philosophical inquiry.

In this process there is, of course, always the possibility of misinterpretation. Sometimes the translation of a term already poses serious linguistic problems. I remember how one interpreter at the first conference in Teheran talked about reincarnation instead of resurrection, a mistake that was detected only be-

⁸The following volumes, recently translated into English, provide excellent material for the preparation of interreligious dialogues with the respective traditions. Cf. the Encounter Series on the home page of the St. Gabriel Institute for Theology of Religions, at www.rti.st-gabriel.at, which includes the following, all of which were edited by Andreas Bsteh: *Islam Questioning Christianity: Lectures—Questions—Interventions*, Christian Faith in the Encounter with Islam 1 (Mödling: St. Gabriel Publications, 2007); *Christian Faith in Dialogue with Islam: Interventions*, Christian Faith in the Encounter with Islam 2 (Mödling: St. Gabriel Publications, 2007); *Hinduism Questioning Christianity*, Christian Faith in the Encounter with Hinduism 1 (Mödling: St. Gabriel Publications, 2007); *Christian Faith in Dialogue with Hindu Religious Traditions*, Christian Faith in the Encounter with Hinduism 2 (Mödling: St. Gabriel Publications, 2007). Forthcoming are *Buddhism Questioning Christianity*, Christian Faith in the Encounter with Buddhism 1; and *Christian Faith in Dialogue with Buddhism*, Christian Faith in the Encounter with Buddhism 2, also edited by Bsteh.

cause it provoked rather awkward questions from the Muslim side. Despite all these pitfalls, however, the interpretation and reinterpretation of religious traditions in interfaith communication has proved to be immensely fruitful intellectually and represents a singular way to learn from each other. The symposia in St. Gabriel in the 1980's and 1990's were a pathway leading to subsequent dialogues and testify to the seriousness and sensitivity with which the latter have been prepared.

In the 1990's the V.D.I. began to be centered on the relationship between Christianity and Islam. One of the reasons for this was the urgent political need to find common ground between the two major world religions that have been in conflict with each other throughout most of history. However, it was also due to the merit of the extraordinary scholars who encouraged and accompanied this dialogue, such as Fr. George Anawati, an Egyptian Dominican and internationally renowned specialist on Christian and Muslim mystics, and Fr. Adel Theodor Khoury, a Lebanese Maronite priest and leading international scholar on Islam. The dialogue process started with two international conferences in Vienna, in 1993 and 1997.⁹ They were attended by high-ranking academics and politicians from the Muslim and Christian world, the aim being to bring influential personalities from the respective faith communities into contact with each other. They were expected to be both firmly rooted in their faiths and ready to engage in interreligious dialogue. The list of participants of these conferences reads like a "Who's Who" of those active in this field today, and many of the participants went on to hold major positions in their governments thereafter. This demonstrates the farsightedness of the V.D.I. at a time when the Christian-Muslim dialogue was still in its beginnings.

The next step taken by Bsteh was to organize a series of smaller meetings on ethical issues. The Vienna Christian-Muslim Round Table (VICIRoTa), which took place every two years between 2000 and 2008, was again attended by renowned Christian and Muslim scholars.¹⁰ Half of the participants were men and half—believe it or not—were women, coming from various academic backgrounds: law, sociology, economics, and political science, as well as theology. These round tables examined topics central to a global ethics. The guiding questions throughout these dialogues were: Which global problems must be solved, and what contributions can Christians and Muslims make so that peace may be possible in the twenty-first century?

What greatly added to the success of these conferences was that the circle of participants remained more or less the same throughout the entire dialogue process. This made it easier to talk to each other and, even more important, to understand better the way the others thought. The atmosphere of friendship that developed, thanks to the untiring care and dedication of the organizers, also proved

⁹See Bsteh, *Peace for Humanity*; and idem, *One World for All*.

¹⁰The participants came from Iran, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, India, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Lebanon.

to be intellectually stimulating.¹¹ The VICIRoTa dialogue process officially ended with the fifth conference, held in Vienna, October 26–28, 2008, at which a Manifesto was adopted and presented. The ceremony was attended by the Austrian president and the Archbishop of Vienna, with former Iranian President M. Khatami as a guest speaker. The findings could thus be communicated to the wider public.¹²

Between 1996 and 2008 the Institute at St. Gabriel also organized four Austrian-Iranian dialogues, which brought together Austrian and Iranian scholars from the fields of law, theology, and the human sciences (political science, economics, and sociology). The conferences were held twice in Teheran (1996, 2003) and twice in Vienna (1999, 2008).¹³ They were initiated in 1994 at a meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries, Alois Mock and Ali Akbar Velajati, and covered similar ground as the dialogues described above, treating the concepts of justice, values, and peace in Christianity and Shiite Islam.

The first dialogue in Teheran in 1996 met with amazing interest on the part of the media (or was made to do so) and was broadcast in full on television. The following meeting in Teheran in 2003, just before the beginning of the second Iraq war, was much less spectacular. This showed *inter alia* that interfaith dialogue had become more common in Iran in the meantime. This was mainly due to the personal interest of then-President Khatami, who initiated the United Nations Dialogue of Civilizations.

It was also Khatami who had requested that an interreligious dialogue be held in public on the occasion of his state visit to Austria in March, 2002. This singular event took place at the Hofburg with a large audience present. The dialogue partners included the Austrian president, the Roman Catholic archbishop

¹¹The conference proceedings of these four symposia have been published in German, English, and Arabic, and partly in Urdu. All were edited by Andreas Bsteh and Tahir Mahmood: *Reading the Signs of the Time: Contemporary Challenges for Christians and Muslims*, 1st VICIRoTa (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2003); *Intolerance and Violence: Manifestations—Reasons—Approaches*, 2nd VICIRoTa (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2004); *Poverty and Injustice: Alarming Signs of the Present Crisis in Human Society Worldwide*, 3rd VICIRoTa (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2006); and *Education for Equality: An Answer to Injustice and Intolerance*, 4th VICIRoTa (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2007).

¹²Vienna International Christian-Islamic Round Table Manifesto, Adopted on the Occasion of the 5th VICIRoTa Plenary Meeting at St. Gabriel on October 24, 2008.

¹³The proceedings of the first three conferences have been published in German, Arabic, Farsi, and English; the fourth volume is forthcoming. See Andreas Bsteh and Seyed A. Mirdamadi, eds., *Gerechtigkeit in den internationalen und interreligiösen Beziehungen in islamischer und christlicher Perspektive* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1997); Andreas Bsteh and Seyed A. Mirdamadi, eds., *Werte—Rechte—Pflichten: Grundfragen einer gerechten Ordnung des Zusammenlebens in christlicher und islamischer Sicht*, 2. Iranisch-Österreichische Konferenz, Wien, 19. bis 22. September 1999 (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2001); Andreas Bsteh, Seyed A. Akrami, and Seyed A. Mirdamadi, eds., *Friede, Gerechtigkeit und ihre Bedrohungen in der heutigen Welt*, 3. Iranisch-Österreichische Konferenz, Teheran, 22. bis 26. Februar 2003 (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2005). The volume on the 4th conference, on hermeneutics, "Hermeneutik, 4. Iranisch-Österreichische Dialogkonferenz, St. Gabriel, 27. bis 30. Mai 2008," is forthcoming.

of Vienna, the Greek Orthodox metropolitan, and the Armenian bishop of Austria, as well as several university professors. It was not so much the publicity that made this dialogue memorable as the makeup of its participants. To see representatives of religion, politics, and academia sitting side-by-side debating religious issues in public was an unusual sight in a country such as Austria, where church (and other religious communities) and state are constitutionally separated and where religion and politics thus belong to different social spheres. The very mixture of religious and political actors at this event represented a model of interaction between religion and politics that was foreign to the Austrian (and other Western) contexts. Because of this, the participants found the initiative to be laudable but also somewhat awkward. It was there that Khatami rather poetically compared interreligious dialogue to fine and precious rosewater, which must be distilled from many rose petals (which inspired the title of this essay). In the same way, our words in interfaith dialogue have to be distilled from our various religious traditions, so as to inspire the other.

At that time it was decided to examine the subject of hermeneutics at the next Austrian-Iranian meeting, scheduled for October, 2006. For political reasons this conference had to be postponed several times, but it finally took place in Vienna in May, 2008. This is but one example showing how sensitive interreligious dialogue is to political change, which can either facilitate it or make it difficult or even impossible.

It is noteworthy (also politically) that the Iranians as Shiites wished to conduct separate dialogue meetings, considering their Islamic tradition to be separate from Sunni Islam. Indeed, both religiously and culturally, the way they approached ethical, anthropological, and ultimately theological questions was markedly different. This shows that each interreligious dialogue has a distinct content as well as its own dynamic, which varies according to the persons involved and their religious traditions and academic level, which, incidentally, was very high in the case of the Iranian scholars.

In 2005 a decision was made to combine the Vienna Christian-Muslim Round Table (VICIRoTa) meeting with a summer school to which students from the participating Muslim countries and the University of Vienna were invited. Together with the participants of the Round Table academic dialogue, twenty-five students attended the meetings and pursued a special course of study in July, 2006. The experience was so good that it was decided to continue along this path. In July, 2008, there was a second summer school—the Vienna Christian-Islam Summer University—with an extended three-week program and a larger number of participants. It took place in Stift Altenburg, a Benedictine monastery near Vienna. Here the campus-like atmosphere proved to be very conducive to extensive encounters and long evening talks among students and teachers. The forty students, who were chosen by their respective universities (where our dialogue partners teach), were a highly engaged and gifted group. The event was widely covered by the media and not only demonstrated that interreligious dialogue is accepted by church and society in Austria but also that

many people feel an urgent need for it, particularly for dialogue between Christianity and Islam.¹⁴

During the decades in which these dialogues took place, many other inter-faith-dialogue initiatives were founded, particularly after 2001. This variety of efforts for better interreligious understanding helps people better to comprehend the dynamics of dialogue processes, which—if one does not count their mostly polemical medieval predecessors—are a new way of creating encounters between religions, an experience that is both liberating and full of promise. The main aim of the V.D.I. was to define basic elements of a global ethic through dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Questions of theology and spirituality were extensively discussed in the preparatory academic symposia. They were not explicitly treated in the subsequent dialogues, although they did enter them indirectly insofar as Christian and Muslim ethics are based on theology and the respective scriptures, in which ethics and theology are interlinked.

These reflections show that many lessons can be learned from the V.D.I. dialogue process. Among these are the needs for serious and often demanding intellectual preparation as well as good personal relations among the participants. They also demonstrate that different subjects demand different approaches and that varying results may be expected from them. The following systematization is an attempt to interpret these insights hermeneutically and to make them the basis of a typology of interreligious dialogue.

III. A Typology of Interreligious Dialogues: Life—Theology—Ethics

A. Preliminary Remarks: The Word at the Center of Life and Religious Discourse

One of the main characteristics of humans is that they talk and listen to each other. Ancient philosophers described the human as a being *logon echon*, a living creature that “has the word.” According to them, communication constitutes the very essence of humanity. There are, of course, different forms of communication, not all of which qualify as dialogue. Information about the weather, military or other kinds of orders, political agitation, and negotiations (for example, on trade) are not “dialogue” in the true sense. Negotiations, for instance, differ from it in that they are about interests, not ideas.

In other cases it is more difficult to draw a clear line: Can issues be debated in dialogue, or is its one and only purpose to listen to the other and his or her ideas? What is dialogue, then? I think its central characteristic is that it is an encounter between persons *dia-logou*, “through the word.” This personal dimen-

¹⁴The Austrian Ministry of Education and Science financed the program both times, with academic credits being offered by the University of Vienna. The next Vienna Christian-Muslim Summer University will take place in July, 2010.

sion becomes more distinct the more we communicate on issues that are of particular importance to us. When we say something about ourselves, it creates an inner bond with the other. This holds particularly true for discussions on religious and ethical topics, which profoundly shape our identity as human beings and believers. This notion of dialogue as a personal encounter of people who are searching for truth can be found in religious as well as nonreligious—for example, philosophical—contexts.

In the Platonic dialogues truth is found through words and reason (in Greek, both *logos*). Through the process of *dia-logein*, ignorance is overcome and humans are transformed. That these dialogues are aporetic—that is, they do not give final answers to philosophical or ethical questions—indicates that this process of acquiring of knowledge and consequently of personal change always remains incomplete. Plato attributed to it a kind of numinous quality and power because, in talking to the other often and intensively, a light may suddenly appear in the soul that guides us to new insights. This eloquently describes the experience of dialogue. However, because of its creative quality and critical dimension, it has also been regarded throughout the ages with suspicion by those who do not value free thought and new ideas.¹⁵

The word also plays a central role in all religions. In particular, the three monotheistic religions as religions of the book are also religions of the word, sharing a common belief in the creative power of God's word. As a psalm says: "By the LORD's word the heavens were made; by the breath of his mouth all their host" (Ps. 33:6).¹⁶ That God creates primarily through God's word is central to the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scripture. This culminates for Christians in Jesus Christ's being called the Word of God (Jn. 1:1). After creation the history of humankind is conceived in the Bible as a dialogue between God and humans, in which God's word inspires, orients, and admonishes. This dialogue—and this is the ultimate assertion of the covenants in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—is not severed by God, despite human failure and disobedience: God does not withdraw from communication, which is conceived in the monotheistic religions as the very condition of human salvation.

This centrality of the word as the means of divine creation and salvation also confers a particular status on the word at the intrahuman level. If God speaks to men and women, thereby revealing Godself, then they are to interact *dia-logou* as well. In an analogous way their words also have creative power. This high esteem for the word as well as the belief in its potential to change the other and the world around us is common to all three monotheistic faiths and could serve as a powerful motivation for dialogue among them. In any case, it

¹⁵Later, Western philosophy became less dialogical. In the twentieth century dialogical philosophy (Martin Buber, Ferdinand Ebner, and, in a different way, Jürgen Habermas) attempted to reemphasize dialogue. It must not be forgotten, however, that science in all its forms is a highly formalized dialogical process in search of truth.

¹⁶Biblical quotations are from the *New American Bible* (Washington, DC: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1969).

should engender a particular sense of responsibility for it.

What distinguishes dialogue from propaganda is the knowledge that the partner has something to contribute. Speaking to each other makes sense only if one recognizes that one's insights and capacity to find solutions are limited and must therefore be complemented and enriched by what others have to say. Dialogue thus depends on the realization on both sides that they do not own the truth but are striving for it. It goes without saying that any dialogue presupposes reflected positions and identities. As Albert Camus wrote, dialogue is possible only between people who remain who they are and speak the truth. Thus, in conducting dialogue, identity and convictions are not to be left behind but are to be deepened and intensified through dialogue. This is one factor that makes for its dynamism and fruitfulness.

Dialogue is the opposite of coercion and force. To speak with the other *per definitionem* means to abdicate violence. As the argument between Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Buber shows, however, dialogue does have its limits where one party rejects peaceful communication.¹⁷ Where these limits lie has to be decided carefully and responsibly in each situation. This draws our attention once more to the high moral preconditions of dialogue, including unwavering respect for the other and her or his beliefs, as well as the readiness to go out of one's way to carry on communication.¹⁸ Ultimately, the belief that God stands by God's word under all circumstances should serve as the model for human readiness to accept the other—imperfect as the situation might be.

B. Three Types of Interreligious Dialogue: Aims, Insights, and Truth-Claims

In the following I would like to distinguish among three different types of interreligious dialogue: the "dialogue of life," the dialogue on religious experience and theology, and the dialogue on ethics and law. This differentiation is appropriate because of their different aims, the insights to be gained from them, and the different truth-claims that can reasonably be made in them. In doing so, I modify the common scheme, which distinguishes between a "dialogue of life," a dialogue of intellectual exchange, and a dialogue of common action, to which the dialogue of religious experience is sometimes added. I consider this typology to be inadequate since it does not sufficiently distinguish between the different types of rationality, which are specific to theology and ethics and therefore make

¹⁷See Martin Buber, *Brief an Gandhi* (Zürich: Verlag "Die Gestaltung," 1939).

¹⁸What I cannot examine here is the rather complex relationship between dialogue and mission (*dawa*). For an overview of the Catholic debate, see Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); from a Protestant perspective, see Reinhold Bernhardt, *Ende des Dialogs? Die Begegnung der Religionen und ihre theologische Reflexion* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005). For the treatment of the question in traditional and contemporary Islam, see Henning Wrogemann, *Missionarischer Islam und gesellschaftlicher Dialog: Eine Studie zu Begründung und Praxis des Aufrufes zum Islam (da'wa) im internationalen sunnitischen Diskurs* (Frankfurt/M.: Lembeck, 2006).

for different types of truth-claims. This has far-reaching consequences for the results that can be obtained and the aims that can be reached by dialogue. The reasons for this will be spelled out in what follows. First, however, I would like to reflect briefly on the “dialogue of life” (including practical cooperation), which is also the basis of all intellectual endeavors.

1. Interreligious “Dialogue of Life”

In a certain sense, every dialogue is also a “dialogue of life,” though the “dialogue of life”—which I therefore put within quotation marks—encompasses much more than verbal exchange. What will be said in the following, therefore, pertains to all types of dialogue, regardless of their content.

There is a great variety of social interaction in everyday life between believers of different faiths. These encounters, verbal and nonverbal, are by far the most common form of dialogue in a religiously pluralistic world. It is here that members of different religious communities get to know each other and learn about and from each other. It is here that attitudes toward the other are shaped, and it is here that virtues such as consideration, tolerance, respect, and practical assistance for others are strengthened as the basis for any decent society, both nationally and internationally. The “dialogue of life” is the first and indispensable step toward reaching this end. Only if it functions in a particular society can religious pluralism become a socially accepted and even enriching fact.¹⁹ One of its most important forms is social cooperation. Tackling local problems together in civic associations is one of the best means of getting to know each other and developing mutual respect. Moreover, aesthetic experiences can also further the appreciation of different cultures and religions. One of the most successful initiatives in the conflict-prone Vienna public-housing system was cooperation in writing multiethnic cookbooks. Thus, even the culinary dimension can be important, even if it is only indirectly related to religion.

The most interesting feature of these encounters and activities is that, through them, people belonging to different religious communities come to represent their respective religion (and ethnicity) in the eyes of the other. This holds equally true for Mother Teresa of Calcutta in a Hindu context as for the Turkish family next door in the Austrian context. Both as representatives shape the perception of their beliefs among other believers. In multireligious settings all actions therefore have a double effect: Not only are they the good or bad deeds of a particular person, but they are also attributed to him or her as a member of a specific religious (or ethnic) group. In this way they can contribute to either peace and interreligious understanding or further conflict. I would like to relate

¹⁹Expectations, however, should not be set too high, since one has to keep in mind, e.g., that in Vienna public-housing conflicts exist not only between adherents of different religions but also between people from other types of groups. In other words, conflicts are not caused solely by differences in religion, but they also arise for a variety of other reasons.

two personal experiences to illustrate this. First, at one of the dialogue meetings a Muslim participant told us that, according to Islamic custom, the Qur'ān should always be placed at the highest place in the room. He taught me to respect the Bible in the same way. Such episodes make us grateful toward the other's religion, thereby creating an inner bond. Second, a Jewish businessman began to study Judaism at the age of sixty-five; thereafter, he continued with Protestant and Catholic theology. He was about seventy-five when he regularly attended my classes. This man came to represent for me Judaism's particular love of wisdom. If many people have such experiences day after day, this positively influences mutual understanding, induces change and personal transformation, and creates a basis for peace in a multireligious and pluralistic world.²⁰

2. *Interreligious Dialogue on Religious Experience and Theology*

Being an encounter between persons, the dialogue on religious experience and theology requires all the qualities and practical virtues needed in the "dialogue of life," such as respect for and readiness to listen to the other, accepting him or her as an equal, and a positive and well-meaning attitude in general. Its specificity lies in its aims and insights, which are linked to the particular truth-claims appropriate for this type of mainly intellectual exchange.

Religious creeds are based on religious experience. The old dictum, *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the rule of prayer is the rule of faith), shows that the experience acquired from prayer—that is, from communication with God—is normative for faith and therefore for its reflection in theology in the Christian, but more generally also in the monotheistic, traditions.²¹ In the Eastern traditions the same holds true for meditation. Although this would have to be explored in greater detail, what matters here is that communication with God or the search for the divine precedes any reflection on them. At the same time, any experience gained from them is necessarily interpreted within the framework of a particular faith and its scriptures and traditions.²² Religious experience cannot be detached from the prior religious knowledge through which it is interpreted. To make this more clear: Even the great spiritual figures and founders of creeds depended for the interpretation of their mystical encounters on the religious traditions in which they were raised, which were part of their spiritual heritage. This is the case with Jesus in regard to Judaism and with Mohammed in regard to Judaism and Christianity. The same holds true to an even greater extent for their followers: Whatever religious insights we might have, they are always gained within a particular religious tradition, reflecting its contents and being expressed in its

²⁰Of particular importance is the influence between Western and Eastern religions and lifestyles. Whereas the West has for a long time been inspired by Eastern spirituality, Eastern religions—particularly Buddhism—have learned caritative practices from the West.

²¹I use the term "theology" as the reflection of the relationship with God or the divine, which becomes concrete in religious or mystic experience.

²²Changing this framework would be conversion, which is precisely not the aim of dialogue.

theological framework.²³

This has important consequences for interreligious dialogue on faith issues. Since our religious belief-systems have different points of departure, they cannot be debated in the proper sense of the word. But, we can share our faith experiences and theological reflections. The different ways of thinking about God or the divine inspire us. Because they are incommensurable, however, they are not issues that can be discussed to reach common conclusions. The aim of this type of dialogue is to listen respectfully to the other, in order to learn what he believes and how she understands herself. The common search for truth, therefore, takes the form of a *cognitive* striving for better and more differentiated comprehension. Interestingly enough, this also leads to a better understanding of one's own faith. Through this type of dialogue, religious identities on both sides are deepened, although the truth that is believed in remains distinct. Since the question of religious truth has been at the center of many of the recent debates in the Christian theology of religions, a short reflection on this is necessary here.

Speaking about truth—and particularly about religious truth—is often accompanied by an acute sense of unease and even embarrassment, understandably so. For too long absolute truth-claims led to discrimination against—and, even worse, to the subjugation and harassment of—those of other faiths. This calls for caution. In a global and pluralistic world situation, how should we deal with claims of religious superiority that debase others? How can we prevent religions from being misused as means of political and human self-assertion?

These are central political and religious questions today, especially since religious beliefs have overtaken secular worldviews and are used—and misused—to bolster personal or ethnic identities.²⁴ There are thus a number of reasons why one might want to leave behind religious truth-claims altogether and regard them simply as expressions of human hubris, which has no place in interfaith dialogue.²⁵ This position, however, poses serious epistemological prob-

²³The form this reflection takes, e.g., Talmudic or Greek rationality, and the consequences this has for interfaith dialogue would need further attention.

²⁴It has been discussed recently at length (e.g., in the writings of the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann) whether monotheistic faith traditions are not particularly prone to this type of exclusivism and, therefore, to violence.

²⁵In Christian theology there are basically three theological positions with regard to the relation of Christianity to other religions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and religious pluralism. (1) For exclusivists Christianity is the only true religion; all other religions are false and of no use. Consequently, they cannot (except under exceptional circumstances) lead to human salvation. This position has become marginal in the mainline churches and is held mainly by evangelical Christians; the Roman Catholic Church professedly abandoned it at Vatican II. (2) For inclusivists, other religions contain elements of truth, which culminate in their own religion. This model relates the other religions theologically to their own religious truth. This is the official position of most Christian churches, including the Catholic Church and, indeed, of many if not most religions. The theological question of how the other religions are related to Christianity is answered in different ways. For Christians, the most important are the christocentric approach of Karl Rahner (which sees others as anonymous Christians) and the pneumatological approach. According to the latter, the Holy Spirit is at work in all religions. Bertram Stubenrauch, in his *Dialogisches Dogma: Der christliche Auftrag zur innerre-*

lems. In general, truth-claims are part of any dialogue on whatever issue. Those who state a fact claim it to be true, and the same holds for religious truth. The postmodern idea that all creeds and cultures are equally valid expressions of the common human experience of some sort of transcendence represents in itself a truth-claim, which is moreover quite alien to most of the faith traditions. Truth-claims are therefore a precondition for any dialogue and, consequently, also for interreligious dialogue. Moreover, we engage in such dialogues because—and not in spite of—the other's particular beliefs. Differences in religious identities by definition also mean that we hold different convictions. The belief that the Torah that Moses received at Mount Sinai is God's final word to God's people, that Mohammed was entrusted with the holy Qur'ān as God's ultimate revelation, and that Jesus is the Word or Son of God, cannot be equally true. This becomes evident when one imagines a person who wants to choose among them (a situation that becomes more likely in a religiously pluralistic world). It is therefore legitimate that Christians consider Christianity to be the true religion, and that Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists do likewise. If this is not spelled out clearly, one may even play into the hands of those who discredit interreligious dialogue as being relativistic.

The problem therefore is not truth-claims as such, but their alleged *absoluteness*. Although any position proposed on religious and other matters contains an inherent truth-claim, the truth that is uttered can never be absolute. While it is part of human nature to consider convictions to be true and to give reasons for this, these insights remain fragmentary because of the very contingency of the human condition. This applies to all forms of cultural knowledge—and particularly to religious insights.²⁶ Humans always live in particular historical and cultural circumstances, which facilitate their insights but also limit them. Because of this they cannot gain absolute understanding. It is the basic assertion of the sociology of knowledge as well as hermeneutical philosophy that absolute comprehension is impossible under the conditions of contingency. Any absolute

ligiösen Begegnung (Freiburg: Herder, 1995), has shown the implications that this has not only for intra-Christian discourse but also for interreligious dialogue. (3) The third position is religious pluralism, which considers all religions to be equally true and witnessing to the same unfathomable truth in different ways. For an example of this, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Gott ohne Grenzen—eine pluralistische und christliche Theologie der Religionen* (Gütersloh: Güterloher Verlagshaus, 2005).

²⁶The type of knowledge gained in the natural sciences differs fundamentally from that which may be acquired with regard to human life. Whereas the former largely rejects the idea of a free will, the latter obviously does not. The equation of these two different types of truth leads to serious confusion, as Aristotle remarked. "Exactness," he wrote, "must not be demanded of all scientific questions in the same way . . . It would be as incongruous to accept probabilities from a mathematician as it would be to demand strictly logical conclusions from a rhetorician" [and, hence, ethicist] (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I 1:1094b-1095 (my translation). This insight has sometimes been overlooked by those demanding a degree of precision in human and political matters similar to that rightly expected from the natural sciences. It is therefore important to rediscover the specificity of ethical and particularly theological thought. This is especially true since fundamentalisms of all sorts transfer the claim of exactness from the natural sciences to religious truth-claims, not taking into account the specificity of the latter.

claims are therefore false claims to wholeness.

We cannot have the truth but can only strive for it. Humanity remains *homo viator*, and its perception of truth therefore remains fragmentary. As the apostle Paul wrote: "At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12). In this connection the German theologian Johann B. Metz spoke of an "eschatological reservation" (*eschatologischer Vorbehalt*),²⁷ which means that all absolute claims to truth, be they political or religious, are ideological in character, because the full truth will be revealed only in the *eschaton*. Although this fact may seem trivial, it should engender existential and intellectual humility. Moreover, it has strong anti-ideological and anti-fundamentalist consequences.

The most important characteristic of theological reflection is that its "object"—God—remains a supreme mystery that far transcends human comprehension. Our theological language, therefore, is always far more inadequate than adequate in divine matters,²⁸ a basic insight that within the Christian tradition has been affirmed under the name of negative or apophatic theology. Acknowledging this simple and self-evident fact could immunize it against all forms of religious positivism. There would have been fewer conflicts over religious differences if people had kept in mind that our ignorance in divine matters far exceeds our knowledge of them. A famous story in the history of theology depicts St. Augustine as he walked along the seashore, reflecting on the mystery of the Holy Trinity. When he saw a child trying to bail out the sea with a nut shell, he understood that his intellectual endeavors were similar to this child's attempts. Thus, any theological pursuit of religious truth must be accompanied by the humble insight that religious truth is unfathomable and infinitely greater than human reason.

For interreligious dialogue this means that humans are called on to search for the truth together and that this search requires us to relate to each other and learn from each other. If this were not the case, dialogue would make no sense.²⁹ In theological matters we may inspire and help each other to deepen our understanding of our own and the other's convictions, while at the same time finding ourselves before the ultimate mystery that transcends all our concepts. It was the dialogue with the Eastern religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) in particular that brought this notion of mystery back into interreligious discourse, linking it to

²⁷Johann Baptist Metz, *Zur Theologie der Welt* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1968), p. 143.

²⁸This trenchant statement against positivism in matters of religion was made a matter of dogma at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). See Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. Peter Hünemann, 37th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), No. 806, p. 361.

²⁹In Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990). In his later writings, Swidler has differentiated further, giving six different reasons for the deabsolutization of truth (historicism, intentionality, sociology of knowledge, limitations of language, hermeneutics, and dialogue), all of which pertain to the fact that human insights are bound by time and space and can therefore never be absolute.

religious experience, from which all theology acquires its insights. Religious experience, however, does not invalidate religious belief-systems and the differences among them, which as stated above are the very condition and frame for its interpretation.³⁰

Those who best understood that God is far beyond human reach and always greater than our ideas of God have been the mystics in all religious traditions. This gave them a wide and open mind in divine matters and made them beacons of religious tolerance. It frequently also led to suspicions and persecution by their own religious communities. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss in detail the differences between the religious and mystical experience in various faith traditions. What has been demonstrated, however, is that this experience always forms part of a specific religious faith-tradition, which determines its concrete content, and that it acknowledges that God is always greater than human comprehension, *Deus semper major*. For interreligious dialogue this means that we are to receive the testimony of and reflections on the other's faith with an attitude of respect and the readiness to learn.

3. *Interreligious Dialogue on Ethics and Law*

As mentioned above, ethical reasoning differs from other forms of rationality with regard to its objects, its aims, and its truth-claims. This has considerable consequences for interreligious dialogue and merits being looked at in greater detail.³¹ The objects of ethics are human actions and institutions, that is, the praxis of individuals as well as of the legal and social forms of common life. Its aim is the reflection of the norms, rules, and virtues that govern human behavior and regulate the civil and political institutions so as to make life more humane for each and every person and to contribute to a good, just, and decent society. The truth-claim of ethical reasoning is thus practical in nature. Ethical insights are to improve the praxis of individuals and institutions, so that they better serve humans and create a social and political framework that helps them to lead a good and decent life.³²

The reflection on the good and the just—that is, ethics—constitutes a central

³⁰It would be beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the differences between the mystical experiences in various faith traditions in detail. What is to be shown is that this experience takes place within a specific religious faith tradition.

³¹There has been an ongoing debate on the issue of a common religious ethic in the *Weltethos* Project and Stiftung of Hans Küng as well as in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* under Leonard Swidler as the most prominent of the German and American proponents, respectively. Ethicists proper have not given this theme the attention it merits; see Ingeborg Gabriel, "Weltethos in Bewegung: Zwischen religiöser und säkularer Ethik," in Erwin Bader, ed., *Weltethos und Globalisierung* (Munster: LIT Verlag, 2008), pp. 149–162.

³²In the words of Aristotle: "The part of philosophy with which we are dealing now is not merely theoretical, like the others. We reflect not only to know what is ethically good but also to become good persons. Otherwise this reflection would be useless" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II 2: 1103b; my translation).

concern in all religions. It is not only cult and creed that count but just as much codes, which are of paramount importance for the community, to use Leonard Swidler's terminology.³³ Ethical codes do take different forms, are founded on different religious rationales, and emphasize different aspects of moral behavior as being of particular importance. Still, religions differ much less in the ethical and legal praxis they prescribe than in their belief-systems. Their overlapping consensus in ethics is thus much greater than the one in their theological insights pertaining to the nature of God or the divine. This by itself is a rather astounding fact that merits further reflection. There obviously exists some essence in human nature that results in that the good for humans is conceived in similar terms everywhere and at all times. Its basic notions are justice, truthfulness, peace, and love. A society where injustice, fights, lies, and disregard of the other are normative is practically inconceivable. We know of no human society where the ethical codes are turned upside down, since this would be highly detrimental to the physical and moral life of humans. Consequently, there exists extensive common ground in ethical and legal norms and virtues in all cultures and religions. This empirical fact should not be obscured by the differences with regard to the good and just that also exist and are apt to catch attention. Moreover, in today's world it has to be argued that these different norms further the human good. To kill innocent people because "the gods want it" (as may have been the case in some archaic religions) is regarded as unacceptable. Even then—and this is the point—such ritual killings took place to ensure some human good, such as to placate the gods so that they might not harm humans and the society as a whole.

This argument points to the fact that the supreme standard for ethics and law is human life *tout simple*. It makes interreligious dialogue on these issues rather different from that on religious experience and theology. However, since ethics is concerned with reflection and thus is an intellectual endeavor, interreligious dialogue on ethics and law cannot be subsumed under a dialogue on "social action or cooperation," as is often the case, but must be treated separately.

With regard to theology: There will always be different forms of monotheism in the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim views. Similarly, a dogmatic consensus between the Abrahamic and Asian religions on the concept of God and the divine is not in sight. But, although we cannot agree on these questions of faith, we can and do indeed agree on most ethical questions. A consensus that humans are not to be tortured or killed, that ethnic or religious minorities are not to be discriminated against, that every person should have shelter and food, and so on can be reached—and it exists already. This shows that, in the field of ethics, interreligious consensus can and should be reached on a great range of issues. In these questions we go beyond accepting the positions of others (though listening remains important) and conduct a discourse on what is right and wrong, just and unjust, which has the aim of reaching an agreement. In this, interreligious dia-

³³Swidler, *After the Absolute*, and in other of his publications.

logue on ethics and law differs fundamentally from that on theological questions of faith.

At this point it should also be mentioned that a considerable part of humanity does not belong to any religious community. Most of these people hold a secular-humanist ethics, which has its origins in Western Enlightenment. This immanent ethics is of considerable importance in today's world on a national as well as on a global scale. It constitutes the basis of the universal human-rights ethos that is incorporated in national constitutions and in the international legal order.³⁴ Its greatest accomplishments are thus institutional in nature. Human rights, democracy, the rule of law, the separation of powers, and the welfare state are the preeminent expression of this "immanent humanism" (Charles Taylor).³⁵ Also, between these secular and religious ethics the commonalities are much greater than the differences, since the foremost concern and common ground are human life, well-being, and the diminishment of suffering. One of the main differences between religious and secular ethics lies in the fact that the latter emphasize institutional structures instead of individual acts.³⁶ As the Catholic writer C. S. Lewis once remarked, Christian and other religious ethics focus on the condition of the individual ship, while secular ethics is concerned with the formation of the fleet.³⁷ Since good ships are needed to make a good fleet, religions rightly stress individual morals as the foundation of a good society. At the same time, institutions can do a lot of good and can influence personal morality. Individual behavior and structures thus being interlinked, the two approaches complement each other. The good and just praxis of individuals is fundamental for a decent society, whose laws in turn decisively shape human behavior.

Whereas the notions of God or the divine are therefore necessarily particularistic, the ethical concepts of religious and nonreligious communities alike tend toward universality. This does not mean that a perfect universal ethics is already in place. It does mean, however, that the ethical norms, rules, and virtues can be discussed rationally between adherents of different faith communities, the aim of this discourse being a well-founded humane consensus on which norms, rules, and virtues further humans and, thus, a good, just, and decent society. This is to be explicated further in three points:

(1) Religious anthropology: It is remarkable that in all religions humans do

³⁴The creation of a new political order was the primary aim of secular humanism, which gives priority to structural over individual ethics; see the study of Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

³⁵The phrase is used in *ibid.*, p. 258; and in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 95.

³⁶Immanuel Kant carried the priority of just structures to the extreme, writing "that even a people of devils can make a good state if only they act reasonably" (Immanuel Kant, *Zum ewigen Frieden* [1795], in *Werksausgabe in 12 Bänden*, vol. 11: Wilhelm Weischedel, ed., *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*, Part 1 [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996], p. 224; my translation).

³⁷C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2001 [©1952]), p. 71.

have a special status because of their particular relationship with God or the divine. This linkage to the transcendent constitutes the source of their very dignity and distinguishes them from all other creatures. In Judaism and Christianity this is expressed in the central belief that human beings have been created by God in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:27). The Hebrew *salam* used in the text originally denoted a statue representing the king that stood in the main square of ancient Oriental cities. In a similar manner, the text says, humans are God's representatives and are to act and be respected accordingly. The qur'ānic notion of humans' being the *khalif* (vice-gerent) of God on earth carries a similar message (Sura 2:30).³⁸ The monotheistic religions thus share the belief that humans have been granted a special position in creation. This view of the human being and the ethics that go with it are but two sides of one coin. If one believes that humans represent God, the consequence is that they are to treat each other with the care and respect that are owed to God. Also, Asian religions affirm the divine presence in human persons, even though for them the divide between humans and the nonhuman creation is much less accentuated than in the Abrahamic religions.³⁹ Thus, to cite but one example, the Indian greeting "Namaste" and the gracious bow that accompanies it are a *hommage* to the divine in the other person. This emphasis on the special status of humans in all religions is thought-provoking particularly if one considers the age and vastness of the universe. It conflicts with popular evolutionism, which rejects any special status and with it any particular dignity of humans.⁴⁰

(2) Responsibility: The emphasis on the dignity of the human being goes hand in hand with the insight in one's responsibility. In all religions, right actions (and not merely a right creed) are needed for humans to be saved, in whichever form salvation is envisaged. For the monotheistic religions as prophetic religions, morality and ethics are closely intertwined. All their prophets demand faith *and* doing the right thing; all denounce any complacency that faith alone can be salvific without good human action. Therefore, by far the largest part of theological writings in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity is on ethical and

³⁸Rotraud Wielandt, "Der Mensch und seine Stellung in der Schöpfung: Zum Grundverständnis islamischer Anthropologie," in Andreas Bsteh et al., eds., *Der Islam als Anfrage an christliche Theologie und Philosophie*, Studien zur Religionstheologie 1 (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1994), pp. 97–143. Further material can be found in Mualla Seldcuk, Richard Heinzmann, and Felix Körner, eds., *Menschenwürde: Grundlagen im Islam und Christentum* (German and Turkish) (Ankara: Üniversitesi Basimevi, 2006).

³⁹This is enhanced by the belief in reincarnation, which makes the difference between humans and nonhumans fluid and leads to a different concept of responsibility. See George Chemparathy, "Der Mensch im Wesenskreislauf," in Andreas Bsteh et al., eds., *Der Hinduismus als Anfrage an christliche Theologie und Philosophie*, Studien zur Religionstheologie 3 (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1997), pp. 179–289.

⁴⁰For a good introduction, see Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, ed., *Peace on Earth and Peace with the Earth: Serving the Goodness of God's Creation*, John Knox Series (Geneva: Centre International Réformé John Knox, 2008); see in the same volume Ingeborg Gabriel, "Fascinated with Domination: The Dark Side of Modernity, Its Ecological Consequences and How to Deal with Them Ethically and Spiritually," especially pp. 125ff.

legal issues. This holds true for the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish Talmud, for the Qur'ān and the Islamic legal writings, as well as for the Christian Bible and Christian moral theology.⁴¹ The extensive debates on ethical and legal issues found in all these traditions and texts have sometimes been regarded as the expressions of narrow legalism. Of course there were, and still are, perversions that subjugate human well-being to legal rules. In the well-known story on Rabbi Hillel, who was asked by a pupil whether he could teach him the Torah standing on only one foot, the rabbi cited the Golden Rule. And, he added, "the rest is commentary." This, however, never meant that commentaries on ethics and law were regarded as superfluous—quite the contrary. They were always regarded as vital to enable believers to act righteously under the varied circumstances of private and political life and to stand up against injustice that destroys and debases human life. In other words, there were always intensive debates on ethics and laws in all religions with the aim of forming moral judgment and thus helping believers to make right decisions so as to do justice to other humans. The prophetic ethos common to the Abrahamic religions places strong emphasis on life's being God's gift and therefore on the responsibility one carries for oneself and for all other humans. Ethics and law are to serve life by furthering the understanding of what makes it more humane and is in accordance with the will of a just and merciful God. The spiritual search in these and all other religions is thus indivisible from the practice of justice and the love of one's neighbor.

(3) Changeability of Ethics: Any look at the history of religions and ethics shows two things: that there are different traditions in each religion with regard to ethics and law, and that the discovery of what is humane constitutes an age-long process of reflection and practice that cross-fertilize each other. This becomes clear when looking at the texts of the Hebrew and Christian Bible and the centuries of interpretations thereafter. All other religions also have rich traditions of interpretation and reinterpretation of their sacred scriptures reflecting on rules, norms, and virtues and thereby answering the moral questions of their particular time. There was and is progress in ethical insights. There also were and are regressions in theory and even more so in practice. In social life injustice and suppression are more common than justice and respect. Any moral and ethical progress, therefore, remains fragile, since the difference between the *is* and the *ought* is a permanent fact of human life in all cultures and religions. At the same time, humans have been striving for and committing themselves to create a better life for themselves and for others in most admirable ways, often accepting great sacrifices to overcome the bad through the good.

It is probably the greatest challenge to continue and to strengthen these efforts today. This requires that the ethical and legal traditions of the world's great

⁴¹Christian theology is often thought to be more interested in dogma than in ethics. This, however, is not the case. To give but one example: The work and particularly the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, the most important medieval Catholic theologian, contains hundred of disputations and thousand of arguments on good and bad in personal and social life—which is far more than he wrote on theological questions.

faith traditions are being brought into contact with each other as well as with global secular ethics through interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The experience of the Vienna Dialogue Initiative shows that this is a demanding task that calls for the interpretation and reinterpretation of ethical and legal traditions by all in a spirit of true humanism. The acceptance of a secular political order, both nationally and internationally, as the only way to assure nondiscrimination of other believers demands self-limitation from all religions for the sake of the liberty and dignity of all. It also liberates religious communities from political ties, helping them to become a critical political and intellectual force wherever peace and justice are violated. At the same time, the ethical and legal wisdom of religions should be brought to the level of politics and civil society. Interreligious dialogue on ethics and law is needed to achieve this aim. This presupposes that secular institutions are willing to acknowledge the weight that religious communities have as civil institutions, due both to their size and to their intellectual and spiritual potential.

Interreligious dialogue on ethics is not an end in itself; its aim is the betterment of the human lot, particularly of those who are oppressed by manifold forms of misery and discrimination. Poverty-reduction, conflict-resolution, the promotion of human rights, and the preservation of the planet's natural resources are thus worthy aims of interreligious reflection and cooperation. We are a long way from religious communities' pursuing such vital aims and striving together for the global common good. Compared to the vision of concord and harmony, the global political reality often looks rather dismal. However, even a very long journey begins with the first step—and rosewater is made from many rose petals. The profound roots of religious ethics, as well as their ability to motivate action, are a great power in this process, providing hope by bringing people together and fostering life. This is the most noble common task of all religions in the present age.