



January 1990

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Recommended Citation

Baird, Robert D. (1990) "Academic Study and the Phenomena of Dialogue," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1027>

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Academic Study and the Phenomena of Dialogue *

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To what extent is the academic study of religion interested in Hindu-Christian dialogue, and to what extent can it handle the phenomena of dialogue within the limitations of its method?

Even with discursive dialogue, which operates on a propositional level, the goals, the questions that are asked and the types of data that count as evidence, all differ from the academic study of religion. The academic and the partner in discursive dialogue are simply not on the same quest. But, the academic study of religion will find the dynamics and results of such dialogue exceedingly fruitful for its investigations. In discursive dialogue the academic study of religion is dealing with a phenomenon within its frame of reference in the sense that it operates on the propositional level. And, to the extent to which candid discussion transpires, the academic will come to a more precise, more complete and more profound understanding of the Hindu or Christian systems being articulated. Of course, no Hindu or Christian can do more than articulate or clarify his or her Hinduism or Christianity.¹

But to what extent can the academic study of religion achieve an understanding of a phenomenon that claims to go beyond, or even in some instances to cancel out, conflicting propositions? In interreligious dialogue the form designated "dialogue in depth" or "interior dialogue" would appear to be most removed and hence of least interest to the academic study of religion. But if the academic study of religion is interested in studying all religious forms and expressions, then it is interested in this form as well. Nevertheless, the participants in this form of dialogue frequently claim that their experience transcends logical contradictions and is an interior spiritual experience. How would the academic study of religion handle such claims?

First we must document this position more fully. "Interior dialogue" or "dialogue in depth" centers in a mystical or contemplative experience. "A basic (though not always acknowledged) assumption is that all intellectualization, doctrinal or otherwise, is of limited relevance, useful only as a means of approach to the divine mystery."² Swami Abhishiktananda states that "the most essential qualification for a fruitful interreligious dialogue is not so much an acute mind, as a contemplate disposition of the soul."³ The Bombay Consultation on the Theology of Hindu-Christian Dialogue (1969) urges that one pay more attention to negative theology in dialogue, since it is more a spiritual discipline than an intellectual exercise. It negates the primacy of logic and conceptual knowledge and relies on experiences, intuition and contemplation. It agrees with the unique character of advaitic experience.⁴

* Excerpt from Robert Baird's article "Hindu-Christian Dialogue and the Academic Study of Religion" in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, edited by Harold Coward, Orbis Books, 1989, pp. 223-228.

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Dialogue in this spiritual and mystical sense lies beneath theological formulations and indeed may lie beneath several propositionally conflicting theological formulations.

Dialogue thus proves to be not only an encounter of one intellect with another intellect, but a meeting of faith with faith. A theological discussion between Hindus and Christians conducted in terms of propositions and logical arguments will soon come to a dead end, and there is no end to the list of examples. Dialogue does however continue when it is based on a meditative approach to the word rather than an analytical one, finding a common basis in a certain awareness of an inner dynamism of reality communicating itself to the seeker.⁵

It is for this reason that Klostermaier finds promising the practice of meditation on parallel upanisadic and biblical texts. Christians must learn in this context to read the upanisads to find Christ in them as he was found in the Old Testament. This is not to misread these texts, but to find "their true inner meaning."⁶ The point of this is to probe beneath the discursive to the "level of spirituality," which is the only level on which actual encounter can take place.⁷ Dialogue, then, is not merely the only authentic encounter between human beings, but is where God encounters human beings as well.

Dialogue is an end in itself—it is not preliminary to the traditional methods of proselytizing. In dialogue the essential encounter of God and man takes place—far more than in the mass-attacks from pulpits and raised platforms.⁸

In response to C. Murray Rogers, Sivendra Prakash quotes approvingly from the "Report on Dialogue with Other Religions" issued at the All-India Seminar on the Church in India Today (Bangalore, 1969): "Dialogue at its highest level is spiritual and religious communion, the experiencing in common of the religious reality."⁹

Not only, then, does this take place at a level other than theology, but it is an experience of truth in distinction from the truth of propositions. And since it is an experience of truth in distinction from the truth of propositions, it is an experience that breaks the "barrier of words," for it speaks of "the possibility of a communion and exchange of experience that go beyond and behind words."¹⁰ Included as a characteristic of this level of dialogue is "ineffability."¹¹

This experience of God in "dialogue in depth" is not only beyond words, inexpressible in words, and deeper than words, but includes silence as well as utterances. "It may be either spoken or silent—and seems usually partly both."¹² Klostermaier reiterates in a variety of places that those who learn dialogue only from books tend to distort it,¹³ and C. Murray Rogers calls the experience an experience of "supernatural complementarity."

At this point the difference and contrast between Christian and pre-Christian have to be stressed and seen in their clear light. Rationally these contrasts will be seen to be insoluble while at a deeper level we will begin to perceive a "supernatural complementarity," a coming together in Christ of all that is genuine in non-Christian spirituality and experience."¹⁴

The question before us is whether, since the academic study of religion is so far removed from this experience, it is simply incapable of handling it and should therefore refrain. It is to be conceded that the academic study of religion does not have access to the "ineffable" or to "supernatural complementarity" or any other experience of a mystical nature that is personal, private or reserved for a religious few. But the academic study of religion is interested in pursuing its understanding of religion as far as its methods will permit. It should also beware lest it become reductionistic by implying that when its methods are no longer applicable, what is said to be left simply does not exist.

Fortunately for the academic study of religion, those who engage in this activity of "deep dialogue" do not remain silent, do indeed speak, and seem to write an ample supply of books and articles on the topic. If the reading of their books and articles inevitably distorts the reality to which they seek to point, it is hardly the academic's fault. But, the academic study of religion is interested in these writings, even when they claim that about which they are writing or speaking goes beyond the words that are being written or uttered. And this *can* be understood academically.

Furthermore, it is not new in the history of religions. It is a claim that mystics have repeatedly made. And if the academic study of religions does not participate in the mystical experience, it has increasingly been interested in analyzing the statements made about that experience by those who claim to have had it. That an art historian does not work with oils does not make him or her any less an art historian. When the statements of the believer contradict each other, the academic cannot appeal to "supernatural complementarity," but he or she can note that such an appeal is made.

If the only response to the experience of "dialogue in depth" is silence, there is little the academic study of religion can do with that. *Silence is ambiguous*. It may point to a lack of understanding of the question, to inability to offer an appropriate answer, or to enlightenment, to suggest a few possibilities. The Buddha's "Flower Sermon" is interpreted by Zen as a non-verbal transmission of the satori experience. But without some verbal explanation, the smile of Mahakasyapa at the silent holding of a flower communicates nothing definite. The silence of the Buddha in the face of certain questions of a metaphysical nature has been the subject of considerable discussion. The *avyākṛta* and their interpretations are discussed by T. R. V. Murti at some length.¹⁵ Although silence is of itself uninterpretable, it takes on meaning within Madhyamika when it is interpreted in the context of the transcendent nature of the real and that the real transcends all thought. In that context the erroneous nature of all metaphysical views of the real is communicated through silence. Fortunately, as Taylor points out, the response is usually a mixture of silence *and* words. To that extent the academic study of religion can understand, but it reaches its limit in the face of pure silence.

Partners in "deep dialogue" sometimes want to affirm in spiritual experience something which, when put in propositional form, is in conflict with other propositions to which they also give assent. A preliminary attempt has been made by James D. Redington to give an account of how one can affirm in "deep dialogue" the truth of an experience while different and sometimes conflicting statements may be

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made about the experience. He appeals to Bernard Lonergan's distinction between faith and beliefs, and similar distinctions made by Raimundo Panikkar and John A. T. Robinson. For Lonergan, as interpreted by Redington, a faith is a dimension of the human being by which a person relates to his or her destiny. Beliefs are the formulations a person makes for oneself and others of that faith.¹⁶

Once again, then, a distinction between faith and beliefs is seen as essential for a world in dialogue. The immediate intention of Lonergan's distinction may be to render intelligible how two very different sets of beliefs stem from a faith and love whose Source is the same. But the belief seems applicable to our present problem too: the question of whether another religion's belief, now seen as stemming from that profound faith and love that grounds beliefs, can be affirmed as in some way true for *all* who see it.¹⁷

Another well-known attempt to distinguish the interior experience from the external manifestation is that of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Smith uses the term *faith* to refer to "an inner religious experience or involvement of a particular person."¹⁸ "Cumulative tradition" refers to

the overt mass of objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe.¹⁹

The difficulty with both of these formulations for the academic study of religion is that "faith" is inaccessible. The academic study of religion can only work with Smith's "cumulative tradition." "Theology is part of the traditions, is part of this world. Faith lies beyond theology, *in the hearts of men*. Truth lies beyond faith, in the heart of God."²⁰ One can grant that for the believer these external phenomena merely point beyond themselves and one can draw inferences and surmise what that to which they point might be. But the inferences are seldom necessary (as distinct from possible), and the fact is that surmise is not sufficient evidence for conclusions within the academic study of religion. And so, one who engages in academic study must limit himself or herself to the "cumulative traditions," the beliefs and other data that can be used by the historian. That is not to deny the "reality" to which they point — nor is it to affirm it. There is a sense in which the academic study of religion is going too far when it states either that the conflicting words that purport to point to an experience beyond themselves actually point to a uniform or similar experience *or* that they point to differing ones. They certainly say things differently. But if we have no access to the thing itself, how do we verify if the experience itself is the same (though *variously* described) *or* different (*as* described)? Perhaps the believer will want to say more, and the participant in Hindu-Christian dialogue will want to say more, and that more will be duly noted. But noting it does not constitute either assent or dissent.

The academic study of religion, then, operates within limits. It is difficult to see how one engaged in dialogue can object to that so long as it does not claim that

its level of investigation exhausts reality. And it is equally difficult to see how the academic study of religion can justify ignoring Hindu-Christian dialogue, which is a prominent religious phenomenon in the modern world.

Notes

1. Cf. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), chap. 5; and Robert D. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1971) pp. 134-152.
2. Eric J. Sharpe, "The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth Claims*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) p. 87.
3. Swami Abhishikananda, "The Way of Dialogue" in *Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. H. Jai Singh (Bangalore: CISRS, 1967), p. 85.
4. Quoted by Sharpe, p. 88.
5. Klaus Klostermaier, "Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Its Religious and Cultural Implications," *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion* (1971), p. 89.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Klaus Klostermaier, "Dialogue—The Work of God," in *Inter Religious Dialogue*, p. 125.
9. Klaus Klostermaier, "Hindu-Christian Dialogue," in *Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths*, ed. S. J. Samartha (Geneva: WCC, 1971), n. 13, p. 26.
10. Matthew John, "The Biblical Basis of Dialogue," in *Inter-Religious Dialogue*, p. 72.
11. Richard W. Taylor, "The Meaning of Dialogue," in *Inter-Religious Dialogue*, p. 56.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
13. "Dialogue—The Work of God," p. 121.
14. C. Murray Rogers, "Hindu and Christian—A Moment Breaks," in *Inter-Religious Dialogue*, p. 113.
15. T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955), pp. 36-54.
16. James D. Redington, S. J., "The Hindu-Christian Dialogue and the Interior Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 44 (1983: 601-2).
17. *Ibid.*, p. 602.
18. Smith, p. 156.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 156-57.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 185