



DISAGREEMENT, DIFFERENCE AND THE FUNCTION OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUES: “BECOMING BETTER VERSIONS OF OURSELVES RELIGIOUSLY”

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ABSTRACT: This article develops an account of dialogue that is not oriented towards agreement but towards constructive disagreement. The interreligious dialogue serves as an example in which enduring disagreement is not a problem to be overcome but a potential source of epistemic and religious growth. Against both classical religious pluralism – seeking common ground –, and approaches modelled on the epistemology of peer disagreement – emphasizing the rational resolution of disagreement –, I argue that dialogues can succeed without convergence. Their aim is neither agreement nor conversion, but a deeper understanding of other religions that enables participants to become better versions of themselves religiously. To explain the epistemic conditions that make such dialogue possible, I develop the notion of *modal justifiability*, distinguishing it from both present justification and unjustifiability. This notion clarifies why some religious differences invite dialogue while others do not and shows how disagreement can function as a constructive hermeneutical resource rather than an epistemic threat.

KEYWORDS: Interreligious dialogue; religious disagreement; modal justifiability; religious diversity; peer disagreement

Introduction

In this article, I flesh out and defend a particular understanding of the practice of interreligious dialoguing.¹ It is based upon an acknowledgement of (irreconcilable)

¹ On some occasions, I speak of “dialoguing” rather than the more common “dialogue” in order to indicate that I refer to a human practice.

“difference”. I defend the possibility of dialoguing across religious differences and sketch the function of such a form of dialoguing. It is *not* to search for common ground, as classical religious pluralism does, nor to overcome disagreement by agreement, as is sometimes assumed in the discussion on peer-disagreement. In successful interreligious dialogues, differences are nothing to be afraid of but a source of inspiration: they help us to become better versions of ourselves religiously.

In particular, I investigate what the epistemic presuppositions of such dialogues are. What do we need to assume epistemically in order to secure the possibility of a constructive interreligious dialogue? In order to answer that question, the notion of modal justification is helpful. It allows for the possibility that a proposition could be justified although it is not right now (for all one can tell). This possibility allows one to disagree with a proposition *and* still to dialogue constructively with it.

Hoops fleshes out the concept of modal justification in his article “Religious diversity and the theory of justification” (in this issue). I (re-)frame it as *modal justifiability* and use it in slightly different ways from Hoops. He considers it to be a truth-related concept, I consider it to be a – in the broad sense of the term – *hermeneutic* concept. I think that we should engage with religious differences in order to understand other religions better and to learn from them. Learning from or, as it is sometimes called, “mirroring” one’s religion in light of a different one and understanding in a deep sense are the issues that I focus on in this contribution.

Obviously, learning, mirroring, etc. are related to truth in the sense in which all epistemically virtuous activities are geared ultimately towards truth. We do not intend to learn from other religions in order to maximize false beliefs. Yet, maximizing truth, let alone converging on it across different religions, is not at stake in an interreligious dialogue – at least, it is not in most successful dialogues. When I engage with different religious beliefs or practices, I want to understand in a deep sense why they differ from my religion² and, if possible, learn from those differences. I dialogue with, say, Buddhism in order to become a better Christian, not to converge on the truth of particular beliefs with the Buddhist. What “dialoguing” and “learning” mean precisely in this context will be fleshed out below.

Rough Equality and Peer-likeness as Requirements for Dialogues

A dialogue is a form of communication between views³ which differ or disagree in some way. Dialogues have a different function than other forms of communication

² “Deep understanding” is an important antidote to polarization and I consider de-polarization to be a crucial virtue in our highly polarized Western societies. Yet, since this contribution is primarily on *interreligious* dialoguing, the focus is on learning as an outcome of the practice of dialoguing, not so much on its de-polarizing aspect.

³ On some occasions, I use “view” rather than the more common “belief”, since dialogues are mostly conducted between (coherent) sets of beliefs, thus, views, rather than individual beliefs. I reserve the term “belief” for religious beliefs proper.

between disagreeing views, such as discussions, debates, etc. The purpose of discussions and debates is to achieve agreement, to “win” an argument (Kraft, 2012, p. 69), or something along those lines. The purpose of dialogues, however, is not to “shoot down” others but to understand other views and other people better.

Dialogues require, in some sense, to consider disagreeing views to be equal and the people holding them to be peers. There is much discussion on the notion of peerhood in the discourse on peer-disagreement (Christensen & Lackey, 2013, pp. 1ff.; Bondy & Godden, 2021, p. 963). This notion is complex and becomes even more complex when applied to religion (Benton, 2020, pp. 185–195). For our purposes here, we do not need to delve into those intricacies. It is sufficient to safeguard that the other view is *roughly equal* and the person we disagree with somewhat *peer-like*. By using those terms, I mean to rule out that the view we disagree with and the person holding it are significantly inferior or superior to our own view. If her view were significantly better sustained by the evidence than ours or in other ways “better”, we should not enter into a dialogue with her but should revise our view in the direction of hers. And if her view were clearly inferior to ours, we should also not dialogue but debate with her in order to show her that she is mistaken. That the other view and the person holding it are significantly superior or inferior is ruled out by the requirement that the other view is roughly equal and the person holding it peer-like.

Rough equality and peer-likeness thus safeguard the possibility that knowledge transfer can in principle go both ways. That knowledge transfer can go both ways is particularly important for dialogues and distinguishes them from other forms of communication. In, say, a communication between a teacher and a pupil, knowledge transfer goes mostly from the former to the latter, not the other way round (in classical teaching models). In dialogues, however, communication is a two-way street, knowledge transfer can go both ways.

“*Rough equality*” and “*peer-likeness*” are to be distinguished from full equality and full peerhood. The reason that we need to distinguish them has to do with the fact that constructive dialogues have other functions than, say, discussions. A constructive dialogue can be successful although both parties keep disagreeing. Yet, if we keep disagreeing with good reasons, we cannot consider the other view to be fully equal and the other person not to be a peer in all relevant respects. If we would, we would have to face the question why we do not convert to the other view. This would make our decision to stick to our own view look arbitrary.

The Different Functions of the Term “Disagreement”

As indicated, dialogues are forms of communication between different views, between people who disagree with each other. The issue of disagreement currently receives much attention (Wahlberg, 2024, p. 7ff.). It is taken up in several different kinds of discourses. Before we analyze its function in successful interreligious dialogues, we

should first raise the question of what its function is in those other discourses. How is “disagreement” framed, what is the guiding question under which it is treated in those different discourses?

In action-relevant discourses, such as political ones, disagreement is often framed as something that needs to be minimized. It needs to be overcome as much as possible in order to make joint action possible. We have seen how disastrous disagreement on Covid-19 can be for taking common action in a society. Deep disagreement is one of the major problems in our current societies, worsened by the internet bubbles in which some people lock themselves up. Overcoming this disagreement is important if we want our societies to be capable of taking common action.

The epistemological discourse on peer-disagreement is driven by the question of how to deal with disagreement rationally. More precisely, the question is to what extent we are entitled to stick to our own beliefs in light of a disagreement that is specified in a certain way, namely as coming from a peer. Conciliationists suggest that we should revise our views in one way or the other in the face of such disagreement, steadfasters suggest that we are entitled to stick to our views under certain conditions (Kelly, 2010, pp. 111–174; Kelly, 2013, pp. 31–53; Matheson, 2015).

This discussion spills over into the religious realm. In the religious discourse, disagreement is often framed under the guiding question as to whether the deep disagreements in religious affairs should lead us to abandon our religious beliefs (Kraft, 2012; De Cruz, 2018).

“Disagreement” as “Potentially “Enlightening Difference”

My suggestion is different. I suggest that we do not conceptualize religious disagreement as in need of being overcome by agreement. There is no need to postulate common ground between your religion and mine, even if they are irreconcilably different. Nor do the differences between your religion and mine threaten my beliefs. Our differences are an opportunity, e.g., for learning, rather than a threat (the question whether all religious differences are an opportunity rather than a threat will be taken up below).

Obviously, there is no need to exaggerate disagreement. Its opposite, agreement, is always welcome. If it emerges during a conversation, it would be foolish to resent it. After all, it makes taking action together easier. Yet, searching for it is not the prime purpose of an interreligious dialogue. Nor are issues of legitimation relevant in the sense in which they are in the discourse on peer disagreement. The prime question is not whether I am entitled to stick to my view in light of a peer disagreeing with it. In a successful interreligious dialogue, disagreements are not framed under the question as to whether I or you should abandon our beliefs or revise them so as to minimize their differences.

For the purposes of this contribution, religious disagreement is predominantly conceived as “*potentially enlightening difference*”. By “potentially enlightening difference”, I mean a kind of difference that is not regarded to be negative, not as something that needs to be overcome as a matter of necessity. Although it *may* be overcome in the process of dialoguing, this process is not guided by the intention to overcome it. Rather, its prime intention is to understand the other religion better and, by understanding it better, to understand one’s own religion better. Potentially enlightening difference is a *constructive challenge* to our religious views which makes us re-think (parts of) them. It triggers important reflection processes which, if successful, makes us better versions of ourselves religiously.

That disagreement triggers re-thinking processes within the context of successful interreligious dialogues can give the appearance that the latter would be functionally equivalent to the discourse on peer-disagreement. After all, the purpose of this discourse is to re-think one’s beliefs with an eye on the question of whether or not one should conciliate in the direction of the disagreeing peer.

There are indeed similarities but there are also differences. The guiding question in a constructive dialogue is not whether I or you should abandon (part of) our beliefs. There is *no pressure to conciliate* with the disagreeing view. As useful as the norm not to privilege illegitimately one’s own evidence is in the context of the discussion on peer disagreement, it is not at stake in the interreligious dialogue (as I understand it here). There is no need to defend one’s position for the simple reason that it is not under pressure. In a successful interreligious dialogue, I do not intend to convert you nor intend to be converted. Nor do I intend to meet you halfway or revise my views in order to minimize our differences. Nor do I expect you to intend that. Rather than minimizing our differences, our goal should be to make those differences fruitful *as being different*. “As being different” is opposed to “as being the same (in disguise)”, thus, opposed to the (pluralistically-motivated) search for commonalities behind all differences. *There is nothing wrong if we keep disagreeing after having dialogued*.

Obviously, in the process of mirroring (in an epistemic, moral or related sense) one’s own religious views in light of the other one, parts of one’s view can be modified. But the motivation is not that you are a peer and that I have therefore a moral-epistemic obligation to modify my beliefs. Rather, the motivation is less moralistic. For example, your religion may have an aspect to offer that mine does not and I think it would be valuable for my religion to incorporate that aspect. Disagreement as potentially enlightening difference is a source of inspiration rather than a threat.

A disclaimer is appropriate at this point: My emphasis upon the positive aspects of disagreement and difference may come across as a principled appreciation of difference. It is not. I do *not* think that all forms of differences are desirable nor that we should tolerate or even dialogue with them. There are forms of difference we should oppose. Among them are religious differences. Think of, for example, differences with religious extremists. In this case, we should not try to understand them nor to learn from them but, if necessary, fight them (see also section 5).

The Right to Be Different: Schwöbel, Pluralism and the Discussion on Peer-Disagreement

Schwöbel (2003, pp. 213–214) and others emphasize the value of the different religious participants' perspectives for an interreligious dialogue. Obviously, those participants' perspectives differ between different religions. Insisting on their value for the dialogue, as Schwöbel and like-minded thinkers do, thus presupposes to acknowledge and even to appreciate difference.

I agree. In some sense, difference is indeed a necessary requirement for a constructive interreligious dialogue. I need you to differ from me if we want to dialogue constructively. I need you to be Buddhist (or whatever) rather than being Christian if you want to dialogue with me constructively as a Christian.

I emphasize this point not so much because I appreciate difference and disagreement as a matter of principle. Rather, I emphasize this because it goes against our deep-grained intuitions. Those intuitions are agreement-oriented. We look - often without acknowledging it - for agreement and common ground when faced with disagreement and difference. Classical pluralism exemplifies this (unacknowledged) orientation in my view. It tries to overcome the differences between the various religions by postulating common ground between them at all cost. I take this to be the implicit rationale driving, among others, Hick's attempt to postulate a *Real-an-sich* of which the (post-axial) religions are supposed to be phenomenal reflections (Hick, 2004, p. 233ff.) or of Knitter's postulate of a shared concept of "eco-human justice" (Knitter, 1995, p. 122ff.).

To be sure, the search for common ground is often important. As indicated above, it is good to look for agreement if we want to take political action together. And there are many other discourses in which it is important to look for ideas, ideals, practices etc. which we have in common. Yet, interreligious dialogues as understood here are *not* part of those discourses. In them, difference is not a vice but a virtue (provided it meets certain requirements).

Classical pluralism succumbs, in my view, far too much to the widespread pull towards overcoming disagreement by agreement, thereby overlooking that certain kinds of disagreements are fuel for constructive interreligious interaction. Rather than desperately trying to overcome differences we should ask whether we can have good relationships and constructive interreligious encounters *across* religious differences. Rather than looking for commonalities between or underneath the religions, we should ask questions like what kind of differences are fruitful in what kind of contexts and what makes for constructive (rather than destructive) dialogues across differences.

The current discourse on peer-disagreement in epistemology is obviously driven by different intentions than the classical discourse on pluralism in religion. Yet, it searches for "rational resolution to the challenges of peer disagreement" (Edenberg, 2021, p. 128). At least, conciliationism is - implicitly - driven by the desire to overcome

disagreement by agreement. I think that the interreligious dialogue should *not* be driven by this desire.

My intention is not to criticize the epistemological discourse on peer disagreement. It may have different purposes than the discourse on religious diversity. Rather, my intention here is to warn that the presuppositions that drive the epistemological discourse should not be taken over uncritically into the discourse on religious diversity. Religious disagreement does not necessarily have to be “resolved” nor to be understood as contesting the legitimacy of certain beliefs. That your Buddhism holds significantly different beliefs than my Christianity does not imply that one of us should revise their beliefs when we dialogue with each other.

Obviously, disagreement *can* imply a necessity to revise one’s beliefs. But we should not automatically assume that it does. Whether or not disagreement implies a pull towards agreement depends on the kind of discourse we are engaged in. If we are engaged in highly action-relevant discourse, discourses on facts or so, disagreement needs most likely to be resolved one way or the other. This has to do with the action-relevance of facts. We need to resolve disagreements on, say, the facts concerning Covid-19 if we want to take proper measures on it.

Yet, my point is that interreligious dialogues should not be modelled along those lines. The resolution of our differences is not at stake in a successful interreligious dialogue. That your Buddhism is different from my Christianity does not necessarily entail that one of us - or both of us - need to revise our beliefs. If you would revise your Buddhist views so as to conciliate to my Christian ones or if I would conciliate to you, we might agree. Yet, *agreement is not what we are after* in this form of discourse. Rather, in a constructive interreligious dialogue, we are after *disagreeing constructively*. In order to achieve that, I do not want you to meet me halfway, “water down” your Buddhism in order to find common ground. I do not want you to conciliate to me nor do I want to conciliate to you.

These considerations may seem to have resemblances with a *steadfast* position in the discussion on peer-disagreement. I want you to remain a steadfast Buddhist rather than to conciliate to my Christian views. Although there is some truth to this, we should remember that both discourses have different functions. In an interreligious dialogue, I am not so much interested in the question whether you have the right to remain Buddhist. I never question that. I am thus not served by you defending your right to stick to your position along, say, Plantinga’s lines (Plantinga, 1995, pp. 191–215). Rather than being defensive, I want you to be *constructive*.

And part of the latter is to feed the way in which your religion differs from mine into the conversation in a dialogue-friendly fashion, in a fashion that invites non-defensive, open communication. Part of the rationale driving interreligious dialogues is thus to overcome our deep-seated inclination to defend ourselves and our position.⁴

⁴ This makes these kinds of dialogues particularly suitable for overcoming polarizations.

Constructive Dialogues, Truth and Justification

What are the criteria which help us to distinguish between those disagreeing positions we can dialogue constructively with and those with which we cannot? In the following, I provide an *epistemic* answer to this question. More precisely speaking, I provide an epistemic answer to the question what makes a constructive dialogue possible. In Kantian parlance, I am concerned with the (epistemic) “*Bedingungen der Möglichkeit*” of a successful interreligious dialogue.

The epistemic question for the “*Bedingungen der Möglichkeit*” of such a dialogue differs from logical, moral, or related questions.⁵ There may be all kinds of reasons why I (fail) to engage in a dialogue. I may (fail to) dialogue with another person because I find her attractive (or arrogant). Yet, here, I am not interested in reasons of this sort for (not) engaging in dialogues. Rather, I am interested in conceptual questions, in the presuppositions that make a constructive dialogue possible. Thus, I ask for epistemic conditions that enable and disable constructive dialogues.

On several occasions, I have argued that a particular concept of truth is a dialogue stopper. I mean a bivalent concept according to which there are only two truth values, “true” and “false”. Bivalence implies that if a belief differs from a true belief in relevant ways, it must be false. There is no other option. Yet, if it is false, a constructive dialogue is stopped right in its tracks. We do not learn from falsity nor consider it to be a challenge to our views. Rather than dialoguing constructively with it, we oppose it, thus debate it or whatever (Grube, 2018, pp. 47–55).

As an alternative, I have suggested the concept of *justification*. Justification is understood here as a cognitively relevant notion. As such, it is different from, for example, morally or theologically relevant notions of justification. Justification in this sense is geared towards truth in a realistic sense. If a proposition, *p*, is justified, we have more reason to think that it approaches truth than if *p* is not justified (Kvanvig, 2003; Silva Jr. & Oliveira, 2023).

Oliver Wiertz has criticized my emphasis upon justification. He thinks that it is motivated by “external considerations, namely the practical wish to solve the tensions deriving from the problem of incompatibility and to enable an authentic religious dialogue” (Wiertz, 2021, p. 93). I reject this criticism. My suggestion to substitute a bivalent concept of truth with that of justification is not only motivated by “external” considerations, not only by the wish to get a serious interreligious dialogue off the ground. Rather, I think that justification is helpful in many cases. These cases consist of situations in which the predicate “true” cannot (yet) be applied but there is a reasonable amount of evidence for or against a proposition. For example, there was probably a moment in time in which the value “true” could not (yet) be attributed to the proposition, *p*, “smoking causes cancer”. Say, there was not yet sufficient evidence

⁵ In “Dialoguing across Difference, Exclusivism and Christoph Schwöbel’s Emphasis upon the Participant’s Perspective” (Grube 2025) I sketch a logical, a moral and a cognitive criterion which help us to determine whether we should dialogue with a different view or not.

to consider *p* to be true. Yet, the amount of evidence available at that moment may have been sufficient to consider *p* to be justified. Justification can thus kick in where truth cannot (yet). There are entire ranges of inquiry in which the truth predicate cannot be applied, ranging from ethics via aesthetics to fundamental physics, and in which the question should be raised as to whether justification can be helpful.

Justification and Action-Relevance

There are cases in which retreating to justification can help to increase our capability to act rationally. These are cases in which (a significant amount of) evidence is available but it cannot (yet) warrant the ascription of the truth predicate and it would be unwise or morally harmful to wait until it can (Grube, 2013, pp. 146–165; Fantl & McGrath, 2002).

An example is the Dutch policy regarding the requirement to wear face masks in all public spaces during Covid-19. The Netherlands introduced such a requirement much later than the neighboring countries. One of the arguments for delaying this policy was that the effectiveness of masks could not be scientifically proven. The inability to fix the truth of the proposition, *p*, “it is scientifically proven that wearing face masks prevents the spread of certain kinds of Covid-19 viruses” was used to legitimize *inaction* when action should have been taken. The result of delaying mask mandates was in all likelihood Covid-19 infections that could have been avoided.

Hammering on truth can in certain situations thus be harmful. In some of them, retreating to justification is helpful. It helps to lower our expectations and thus provides reasons to act rationally in situations in which truth fails to do so. If the Dutch government had not hammered so stubbornly on scientific truth, they could have made a decision regarding face masks much earlier, as soon as there was enough evidence available that allowed them to consider face masks of a certain type to be (very) probably effective. The evidence available may not have been sufficient to consider *p* to be true. But truth is not always necessary to act rationally. In cases like this one, justification is sufficient to legitimize proper action. Had the Dutch government been satisfied with the evidence justifying *p*, they could have taken proper action much earlier.

In sum, the concept of justification allows us to safeguard, and in some situations even to increase, our capability to act rationally. This is one of the reasons why we should endorse this concept.

Modal Justifiability as Opposed to Unjustifiability and *hic et nunc* Justification

As indicated above, I re-frame the concept of “modal justification” as “*modal justifiability*”. I define it as implying the *possibility* that a proposition could be justified

although it is not *hic et nunc* justified (to the best of one's current knowledge). Yet, the modally justifiable is also different from the unjustifiable. Although both are not *hic et nunc* justified, it is not unthinkable that the modally justifiable could be justified - say, in the future - whereas this *is* unthinkable for the unjustifiable - again, to the best of one's current knowledge.

I distinguish thus between three epistemic values:

- “*Hic et nunc* justified” is what is justified right now. In an alethic scheme, this would be equivalent to the value “true”.
- “Unjustifiable” is what is not justifiable to the best of our current knowledge and will not be in the foreseeable future. This includes logical contradictions, such as “married bachelors”, thus, propositions which cannot be true in any possible world. Yet, it includes also propositions for which it is unthinkable that they are true in our world (to the best of one's current knowledge). In an alethic scheme, this would be equivalent to the value “false”.
- “Modally justifiable” is what is not *hic et nunc* justified but not unthinkable to be justifiable in our world. “Modally justifiable” does not have an equivalent in an alethic scheme - at least, if this is conceptualized along bivalent lines.

My thesis is that this threefold epistemic distinction helps to distinguish between different kinds of disagreements. It helps to distinguish disagreements with which we can dialogue constructively from those with which we *cannot* dialogue constructively. In particular, the distinction between modal justifiability and unjustifiability is helpful.⁶ My thesis is thus that the *epistemic values* “modally justifiable” and “unjustifiable” *determine* to a good extent *our communicative stance*, whether or not we engage in constructive dialogues.

More precisely speaking, I hold that there is a relationship between epistemic values and communicative stances via *epistemic attitudes*. By “attitudes”, I mean here the ways in which we conceive views with which we disagree and how we deal with the holders of those views, thus, with people we disagree. “Epistemic attitudes” are thus *not* about the question of whether we agree with a view or not. By definition, we disagree. Yet, they are about *the way* we disagree with another view, how we look at it and at the person holding it. Epistemic attitudes are thus ways of dealing with difference (Saarinen, 2016).

⁶ The *hic et nunc* justified is largely irrelevant in this context since we do not need to dialogue with that which we consider to be justified anyway - remember that dialoguing was characterized as a communication between views which differ. I mention it only as a background that helps to understand the modally justifiable and the unjustifiable better.

The Links Between Epistemic Values, Epistemic Attitudes and Communicative Stances, I: The Example of Pastafarianism

In the following, I will provide two examples of religious views I disagree with, that of Buddhism and of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, Pastafarianism. Obviously, both examples can be substituted by different ones. I have chosen the latter because it is a clear example of a religion which is unjustifiable on epistemic grounds in my view. Other examples of religious views with which I cannot dialogue are conceivable.⁷

The point I wish to make is that, although I disagree with both Buddhism and Pastafarianism, I disagree with them in different ways. Although both are not *hic et nunc* justified (to the best of my knowledge), I regard the former to be modally justifiable and the latter to be unjustifiable. The consequence is that my epistemic attitude towards the Buddhist differs from my attitude towards the Pastafarian: I have a positive epistemic attitude towards the former and a negative one towards the latter. This difference determines the communicative stance I take: I can dialogue with the Buddhist but not with the Pastafarian.

Given the unjustifiability of their beliefs, I have no desire to dialogue with Pastafarians. The reason is that unjustifiable beliefs are most likely false and there is no point in trying to learn from false views. If I appreciate truth, as I do, I should not dialogue with false beliefs.

At this point, my view differs from Hoops' view. To be more precise, I understand the concept of learning differently. I do not deny that we can learn from false beliefs in some sense of the term "learning". Obviously, we can learn from people making mistakes by holding false beliefs. For example, I can learn from the mistakes conspiracy thinkers make not to trust the information on the internet. Yet, this is not the sense of learning that is at stake here. I do not dialogue with Buddhists in order to learn from their mistakes. The same goes for the concept of understanding. To be sure, there are several ways in which I can "understand" the Pastafarian. Maybe she is out to provoke (what she considers to be) the pro-religious establishment, has had a bad childhood, ... Yet, the point is that all those senses seriously underdetermine what is meant by "understanding" in the context of a successful interreligious dialogue. In this context, I want to understand the other religion as being "roughly equal", its differences as "potentially enlightening" so that I can mirror my own religion in it (see above). I want to understand the other believer as being peer-like so that I can learn from her. Yet, this is impossible if I understand the beliefs revolving around The Flying Spaghetti Monster as stemming from, say, the bad childhood the Pastafarian had. This would be a hierarchical way of understanding as is common between psychiatrists and

⁷ German Christianity, the form of Christianity which has close ties with fascist ideology, would be another example. Yet, the reason why we should not dialogue with German Christians is not as clear-cut epistemic as in the case of the Flying Spaghetti monster. In the case of the German Christians, moral reasons play a role as well. Since I do not have it here over moral concerns but over epistemic ones, I do not choose the example of the German Christians but that of Pastafarianism.

their patients. Such a hierarchical way of understanding stands in the way of learning. If I understand her in such a way, I can learn as little from the Pastafarian as a psychiatrist can learn from her patient.

My point is that terms such as “understanding” and “learning” need to be conceptualized here within the context of the practice of dialoguing. This is obviously not to deny that other conceptualizations are possible in other contexts, in other forms of communication. I may try to “understand” the Pastafarian in other contexts, say, that of a controversial discussion. Yet, the sense in which I try to “understand” her in this context differs from the sense in which I try to “understand” her in the context of a dialogue since both contexts differ. Keep in mind that the function of dialoguing is specified here as a hermeneutical one rather than as a truth-gearred one.

In sum, since I consider the Flying Spaghetti Monster-religion to be unjustifiable, I have a negative epistemic attitude towards Pastafarians. This negative attitude determines my communicative stance towards them: I cannot dialogue with them and should not even try to do so.

The Links Between Epistemic Values, Epistemic Attitudes and Communicative Stances, II: The Example of Buddhism

Yet, my epistemic attitude is different towards Buddhists. To repeat: This difference is *not* on account of my agreeing with Buddhism and disagreeing with Pastafarianism. Rather, I disagree with both religions. Yet, I disagree with them in a different way. This difference has to do with the fact that I consider Pastafarianism to be unjustifiable but Buddhism to be modally justifiable. Although *nothic et nunc* justified (for all I can tell), I cannot exclude that it could be justified in the same sense in which I can exclude that Pastafarianism could be justified. *This* is the reason why I have a different, much more positive, epistemic attitude towards the Buddhist than towards the Pastafarian.

I want to understand Buddhist beliefs in a deep sense. This sense of “understanding” is integral to constructive dialogues and differs from the sense in which I want to “understand” the Pastafarian. Rather than “understanding” her as the psychiatrist understands a patient or in some other hierarchical way, I want to understand the Buddhist as a potential peer, as being peer-like. Yes, she is different from me and so are her beliefs. But this difference is “potentially enlightening”. Although being different from mine, her beliefs are “roughly equal” in the sense specified above. This is why I can “mirror” my Christian beliefs in light of Buddhist beliefs in a way in which I cannot mirror my beliefs in light of Pastafarian beliefs.

By entering into a true interreligious dialogue with the Buddhist and attempting to understand her beliefs better, I hope to become a better Christian. For example, I admire that Buddhism puts so much emphasis upon (what I call) character-forming. The question I have is whether I can learn from Buddhism to make my Christian views less moralistic and more virtue-oriented. In order to come to know more about it, I

want to know, e.g., what kind of (religious) anthropology drives Buddhism, how human beings are viewed vis-à-vis the transcendent, etc. Depending on the answer, I may use it for the purposes of developing Christian ethics in a less command-driven sense. And the next time I ponder upon the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37), I will ask myself whether I should focus more so than hitherto was the case on the cultivation of virtues, such as compassion.

My intention in dialoguing with the Buddhist is not to idolize her beliefs. I do *not* want to become Buddhist. Rather, I want to use Buddhist wisdom to become a better Christian, if possible. My hope is also that she becomes a better Buddhist by dialoguing with me. For example, she may come to ask herself whether emphasizing virtues is sufficient for a robust morality and what morality is, according to Buddhism.

Becoming Better Versions of Ourselves Religiously

Since the goal of interreligious dialogues is not necessarily to overcome disagreement, the criteria for their success differ from the criteria used in other forms of communication. Whereas agreement-oriented communications obviously make the achievement of agreement the basic criterion, this is not the case with the kind of interreligious dialogues that are at stake here. The success of those dialogues does not consist in both parties agreeing to become Buddhists, Christians, meet halfway, or whatever. Rather, this dialogue can be successful if one party remains Buddhist and the other remains Christian. Its success is to be sought in the *different way* in which the Buddhist remains being Buddhist and the Christian remains being Christian after having dialogued. It is successful if both have developed a deeper understanding of the other religion and, as a consequence, of their own religion.

That both parties stick to their own religion rather than convert after having dialogued is not breaking news for the practice of interreligious dialoguing. Yet, I emphasize it here because it is important for the purposes of *reflecting on* this dialogue (and not always sufficiently recognized in my view). At least, if the purpose of this dialogue is hermeneutical rather than truth-oriented, its success-criteria differ from the criteria that are used to measure success in other rounds of discussion. To repeat: The success of an interreligious dialogue does *not* consist in the (rational) resolution of disagreement (as is the case in the discussion on peer disagreement), nor in finding common ground amidst all differences (as classical pluralism intends to do), nor in other forms of convergence (as is important in political discourses).

My point is that the success of an interreligious dialogue consists in a *change of consciousness*. Our Buddhist/Christian dialogue is successful if I become a different kind of Christian and you a different kind of Buddhist. More precisely speaking, we should remain ourselves, but in a different way. I want to become a Christian who has ‘digested’ the best of Buddhist (and other (a-)religious) insights and I want you to

become a Buddhist who has digested the best of Christian (and other (a-)religious) insights.

In sum, an interreligious dialogue is successful if it helps us to become *better versions of ourselves religiously and helps others to become better versions of themselves religiously*.

This consequence of becoming better versions of ourselves religiously is summarized well by the keynote address of the *Church of England's* Interfaith and Reconciliation council:

"We do not set out to persuade, or undermine or challenge one another...but rather out of genuine curiosity, and a desire to know one another. We seek to understand one another's differences more profoundly. And in the process, we became more fully Christian, and they more fully Muslim." (Snyder, 2019). Obviously, this holds not only for Islam but also for Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity...as well.

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