

Cornille, Catherine. *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*. (New York: Crossroad/Herder and Herder, 2008). P. xii+265. ISBN-13: 978-0-8245-2464-7

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Catherine Cornille's *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* is an important addition to the literature on Interfaith/Interreligious Studies. The book evidences Cornille's admirable grasp of the relevant literature in fields ranging from comparative theology, the theology of religions, the psychology of religion and the Christian mystical tradition. And, although not immediately apparent given the book's title, it is a fine addition to the literature on contemporary Christian Ethics as well; this, because, in so far as the book's thrust is on the moral and intellectual conditions for successful interreligious dialogue, it helps shed light on the relationship between such virtues as humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy and hospitality to Christian social ethics in the context of religious plurality.

Arranged into five chapters, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* is intended as a 'reflection on the challenges of interreligious dialogue for religious traditions in general, and Christianity in particular...' (p. xi). Cornille admits in the Introduction that Interreligious Dialogue is generally a problematic area for most religious traditions. She intends with the book to 'reflect on the challenges and possibilities of religious plurality and dialogue...' (p. 7-8). While conscious of her non-Christian readership, it is a merit of the book that Cornille makes explicit that the book is written from a Christian theological and faith standpoint. This helps enrichen the book because even though illustrative instances are drawn from non-Christian religious traditions, she is able to focus more freely on Christianity as a concrete case in point to illustrate the 'essential conditions' for interreligious dialogue which she articulates.

The conditions which Cornille considers as critical to the success or otherwise of interreligious dialogue depending on the presence or absence of them are humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy and hospitality. In the five chapters which make up the book, each of these conditions or we could say, preconditions, are respectively taken up for analytical consideration. The first chapter focuses on 'humility. For Cornille, there are at least two dimensions to humility in the context of interreligious dialogue: first, there must be humility toward the religious other in which one recognises the 'limitations of one's knowledge and understanding of the other' (p.10) and second, 'humility not only toward the other religion but also toward or about – one's own religious tradition' (p.10). Catherine terms this second dimension of humility as 'doctrinal humility'. An attempt is made to explicate how the virtue of humility itself has traditionally been understood in the Christian tradition; with a focus on the limitations of traditional understandings when considered within an interreligious dialogue framework. Cornille draws upon such writers as Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas à Kempis, Henri Le

Saux and others within the mystical tradition as she seeks to open up avenues for conceiving humility in the Christian tradition in a manner that legitimizes or, at the very least, does not immediately denounce the notion of 'doctrinal humility'.

In chapter two, Cornille makes the case for regarding commitment to a particular religious tradition as important to the success of any interreligious dialogue. For Cornille, Interreligious dialogue by its very etymology presupposes both religious commitment and real difference. As she puts it, 'it does presuppose commitment to a particular worldview and belief system and a willingness to attest to its truth and validity with other worldviews and belief systems' (p.59). Commitment to a particular tradition functions as both a point of departure and a point of return in the dialogical process. Related topics such as the growing phenomenon of multiple religious belonging and the relationship between dialogue and mission as well as the compatibility of dialogue and apologetics are insightfully touched upon as well. Cornille's particularist leanings are discernable in her critique of the pluralist proposals of Paul Knitter and others who regard superiority in one's subjective estimation of the truth value of one's belief as a hindrance to successful interreligious dialogue. In Cornille's view, a critical balance between openness to the religious other and commitment to one's own religious tradition must be maintained in the act of interreligious dialogue.

'Interconnection' which is the focus of chapter three is the idea that interreligious dialogue 'presupposes a conviction that, in spite of important and ineradicable differences in belief and practices, religions may find one another in a common ground' (95). This common ground may be in the form of, as Cornille discusses, shared external challenges which confront the religions in dialogue such as secularization, a concern for world peace and the alleviation of human suffering. These shared external challenges often work to bring religions to the dialogue table but Cornille considers dialogues stemming from these as necessarily short-termed. If interreligious dialogue would be sustained and serve a transformative role for both religious institutions and individuals, interconnection must go beyond one built on shared external challenges to one which stems from 'a sense of interconnection that is more inherently religious, or internal to religious self-understanding' (p. 110). Common religious experience and the idea of a 'unifying transcendental reality' (p. 121) are discussed as viable bases for providing that deeper sense of interconnection.

The last two chapters signal a transition in the discussion from conditions internal to one side of the religious tradition involved in the dialogue to conditions related to the religious tradition of the other. Empathy captures that 'process of transposing oneself into the feelings, the thoughts, and the experiences of another...' (p. 138). Cornille discusses the conceptual nature of empathy and pays attention particularly to its appropriation in certain phenomenological studies of religion. The rest of the chapter attempts to relate empathy to interreligious dialogue and Cornille analytically guides the

reader through some of the many thorny issues which an attempt to fulfil this condition is bound to encounter.

Chapter five is the last chapter of the book and it takes up the last of the conditions: hospitality. Hospitality is used in this context to refer to 'a recognition of the other as other and openness to learning from the other' (p. 177). Employed in this sense, Cornille's usage of the term differs from those conceptualisations which define it in terms of being an attitude of receptivity to individuals and groups who come from 'strange' religions. In Cornille's employment of the term, hospitality not only welcomes these strangers but considers the very religious elements from which their strangeness derives as being potential sources of transforming truths. This sense of hospitality surely asks much of many religious traditions in so far as religious traditions by their very nature often have a strong belief in the sole sufficiency of their own 'religious teachings and practices' (p. 178). Cornille tries through the chapter to provide an analysis of the weaknesses and strengths of various approaches to hospitality in the Christian tradition.

One very commendable thing about Cornille's *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* lies in it's providing a breath of fresh air in the discourse on interreligious dialogue by moving the discussion from the increasingly bland appeals as to the merits of interreligious dialogue to what key qualities ought to be present if these dialogues are, in fact, to be successful. In this regard, even if one disagrees with the author's claim about the essentiality of these conditions, it is praiseworthy that an underdeveloped aspect of interfaith dialogue is opened up by this book. It may be felt by some that the conditions advanced by Cornille are too ideal, perhaps even utopian, to be met by actual religious traditions but while the sentiment behind this critique is quite understandable, it cannot be admitted as a serious criticism of the conditions because it misses the fact that the conditions are set forth not only as normative criteria for religions in interreligious dialogue but also as a diagnostic tool for making sense of why, very often, interreligious dialogues fail.

A critical note may however be made concerning the somewhat limited applicability of the conditions. Although Catherine is not explicit on this, it would appear that her working model of interreligious dialogue is interreligious dialogue around theological differences and ritual. Other writers, however, distinguish between forms of interreligious dialogue: the dialogue of mind (dialogue around theological differences), the dialogue of heart (dialogue around religious experience and ritual), the dialogue of hands (dialogue around common action) and the dialogue of life (dialogue necessitated by shared communal spaces). Catherine's normative conditions make much sense when read against a backdrop of the first two forms of dialogue but they appear less convincing when seen in the light of the latter two. Many 'dialogues of life' and 'dialogues of hands' have and can be successful without necessarily meeting the

conditions which Catherine discusses. Although she does seem to recognise the possibility of this when she talks about shared external challenges as one avenue for interconnection between religions, her comment about this source of interconnection being of limited value betrays a privileging of theological and ritual forms of dialogue over and above dialogues of shared action and communal coexistence. In many world contexts, however, it is just these two latter forms of dialogue that are most crucial. This weakness notwithstanding, the book's detailed analysis of the issues guarantees that the reader would come away with a much deepened and mature appreciation of both the difficulties and possibilities of interreligious dialogue.