

The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion

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PRECIS

One of the most neglected issues about interreligious dialogue to date has been the role of interreligious dialogue in the academic study of religion. Religious studies prides itself on presenting impartial and secular approaches to the study of religion, whereas interreligious dialogue involves the communication of explicit religious commitments. Can the practice of interreligious dialogue be reconciled responsibly with the academic study of religion, or are the two activities essentially incompatible? This essay attempts to delineate a constructive role for interreligious dialogue in the academic study of religion. Three ways of studying interreligious dialogue are outlined, and it is argued that the practice of interreligious dialogue is not only compatible with the academic study of religion but also one of the field's most promising endeavors.

I. The Problem

Interreligious dialogue is a relatively new development in the field of religious studies, one that is both lauded and feared by scholars of religion. Some scholars praise interreligious dialogue as a method to foster greater respect, appreciation, and understanding between followers of different religions, but others consider interreligious dialogue to be a dangerous activity that transgresses the boundary between religious studies and theology. Why is interreligious dialogue feared in academic studies? The academic study of religion was intended to be nonsectarian and impartial as an alternative to theological studies; in contrast, interreligious dialogue presupposes religious commitments because it involves at least two persons from different religions conversing together about issues of religious significance. Consequently, interreligious dialogue is feared because it introduces personal religious commitments into academic scholarship, which endangers the scholar's ability to be impartial in his or her research.

The purpose of this essay is to examine whether the practice of interreligious dialogue is compatible with the academic study of religion. We will consider whether scholars of religion should participate in interreligious dialogue with personal religious commitments or if they should remain merely detached and impartial observers. I will argue that interreligious dialogue not only is compatible with the academic study of religion but also is one of the field's most innovative enterprises, which should be vigorously supported, pursued, and strengthened. I believe that scholars can no longer afford to see interreligious dialogue as a fringe issue in religious studies but as an essential pursuit of the profession. I will also contend that the academic study of religion must be open-minded and flexible in our age of religious pluralism, in order to accommodate the practice of interreligious dialogue within its framework.

II. Defining Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is defined in this essay as "respectful communication between two or more persons committed to different religions, about issues of religious significance, in a common attitude of open-mindedness."¹ According to this definition, not all conversations between followers of different religions can be called "interreligious dialogues." For example, a discussion between a Christian and a Jew about which cola beverage is superior does not qualify as an "interreligious dialogue," since it is not religiously significant. An interreligious dialogue requires four criteria: (1) interpersonal communication; (2) different religious commitments; (3) a mutual attitude of respect and open-mindedness, implying a willingness to learn and grow from the other; and (4) significant religious content in, or implied by, the conversation. These four criteria must be met in order for the conversation to be called an "interreligious dialogue."

The idea of dialogue in the West can be traced back to Plato's writings. The word "dialogue" is etymologically a Greek term consisting of the root *logos* (translated here as "word") and the prefix *dia* (translated as "through"). Plato differentiated the concept of "dialogue" from other everyday conversations. He used the term "dialogue" to pertain to conversations where "truth" was sought through the exchange of words.[2]

While the term "dialogue" originated in Greece, the idea is widely accepted. If we look outside the Greek culture, we discover that similar ideas of dialogue can be found in other cultures. In Indian philosophy, for example, the Nyaya Sutras advocate *samvada* (translated into English as "dialogue") as one of the sixteen categories leading to liberation.[3] The idea of dialogue, therefore, is neither a form of Orientalism nor a hegemonic concept imposed on non-Westerners but a cross-cultural medium for members of the world's religions to discuss matters in a mutually respectful way. Indeed, the medium of dialogue is a way to move beyond the Orientalism of past scholarship, because it sincerely welcomes all viewpoints and attempts to learn from them. Several events contributed to the growth of interreligious dialogue in the West, but it is not the purpose of this essay to describe them here, as other good works can be consulted on this topic.[4] What is surprising is that few scholars have bothered to write about the place of interreligious dialogue in the academic study of religion.[5] Consequently, this essay intends to generate scholarly discussion about the future of interreligious dialogue in the academic context as we enter a new millennium. Three ways of studying interreligious dialogue will be outlined, and each will be considered for its relative value in the academic domain.

III. Descriptive Study and Interreligious Dialogue

The first academic way to study interreligious dialogue is the descriptive approach. Descriptive study is predicated on detached, impartial, and value-free scholarship. A student who approaches a topic descriptively seeks to describe the topic as objectively as possible, without evaluating the data collected. Descriptive study is valuable not only for documenting the dialogue process but also for participating in actual dialogue, for it is useful to have a descriptive understanding of another religion before entering into dialogue with one of its followers.

The key idea of descriptive study is "objectivity." It is often said that, in order for scholars to avoid any biases in their work, they must approach their research "objectively" in a detached and impartial way. Many scholars insist that the academic study of religion must, in particular, remain objective at all times because of religious biases, and the goal of "objectivity" is elevated as the academic "creed" of the profession. However, upon closer analysis, the so-called "objective study" of humans is flawed, and the following section will outline why, to generate a more open-minded attitude toward other ways of studying interreligious dialogue.

IV. The Myth of Objectivity

The academic study of religion was founded by Max Muller and Edward Tiele as a "science" based on the principles of critical analysis, comparison, and objectivity. From the 1890's until modern times the founding idea of objectivity was taken largely for granted by scholars of religion, but today the idea of studying humans "objectively" has lost its esteemed position.

Today scholars recognize that subjective biases penetrate and permeate their academic writings in many ways.[6] Cultural anthropologists now accept the axiom that "the intrusion of subjective elements into both interpretation and observation is inherent in all research." [7] Scholars in other disciplines are also beginning to accept that, regardless of how hard they try to be objective, their writings will always be influenced by their background training, life experiences, academic models, and pedagogical approaches. Even historians are not free from subjective biases, as the field of historiography has shown (Is it "his-story" or "her-story"?). Yet, despite these realizations, the practice of "objective study" continues to dominate the methodology of religious studies, notwithstanding criticisms of the objective method from feminist, hermeneutical, and postmodernist approaches to religion. Consequently, it is incumbent on scholars of religion to familiarize themselves with the flaws of objective study to retain a healthy openness to other methods of study.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's book, *Towards a World Theology*, presents a powerful critique of objectivity in the social sciences and humanities. He argued that the idea of objective study should be abandoned whenever persons are the central focus of academic research.[8] According to Smith, "To treat a person as if he or she were an object, or anything pertaining to the human as if it were only an object, is, besides being immoral, to misunderstand him or her or it; it constitutes an intellectual error." [9] He then made three points to support his thesis.

First, Smith argued that studying persons as objects is irrational because "the knowing mind is human; is not outside, and cannot get outside, the human race to look at it externally, objectively." [10] In other words, the "objective" study of humans is an illusion because scholars can never step outside their humanity to be truly "objective."

Second, Smith argued that objective knowledge aggravates polarity. He wrote: [T]he traditional subject-object relationship of externalist 'knowing' may itself in certain situations set up a polarity that vitiates rather than guarantees understanding. Pointed examples of this now being cited are the study of the condition of blacks in the United States by white scholars; of the role of women by male scholars; of homosexuality by heterosexual investigators. [11] Objective study may thus exacerbate tensions between groups rather than facilitating scholarly understanding.

Third, Smith argued that all objective knowledge in the social sciences and humanities is "inherently oriented towards the alienation of persons from each other," because objective knowledge is predicated on the duality of subject and object, inculcating an "us vs. them" mentality. [12] He claimed that the dualism inherent in objective study requires researchers to alienate themselves from their subjects, thereby sanctioning separation and depersonalization. [13]

In summary, Smith asserted that the objective study of humans is irrational and dangerous because it can lead to fragmentation, alienation, and division. He concluded that the method of objectivity should be abandoned in academic disciplines where the study of persons -- including their cultures, beliefs, etc. -- is the central focus, which would certainly include religious studies. He ended his critique by proposing an alternative to objective study called "humane knowledge," whereby scholars would study "alongside" their research group rather than on the "outside." [14] According to Smith, the goal of "humane knowledge" is mutual understanding "between or among persons, be it across the centuries or across the world." He wrote that "man cannot know man except in mutuality; in respect, trust, and equality, if not ultimately love." [15] I suggest that interreligious dialogue offers an excellent way to actualize Smith's vision, because dialogue is an activity characterized by mutual respect and appreciation, which are the exact attributes of humane knowledge lauded by Smith.

Smith's critique of objectivity is important for our current understanding of interreligious dialogue. It reminds us that interreligious dialogue is not a passive "object" to be "stretched out on the scholar's operating table," to borrow an apt phrase from Eric Sharpe, [16] but an existential activity that should be appreciated for its interactive human dimension. The purpose of this section was to demonstrate that the so-called "objective" study of persons is inherently flawed.

V. Prescriptive Study and Interreligious Dialogue

A second academic way to study interreligious dialogue is the prescriptive approach. In contrast to descriptive studies, which aim at objectivity, prescriptive studies make explicit judgments about the data collected and, like medical reports, diagnose problems and prescribe empirical or theoretical remedies to solve them. Prescriptive studies, however, may involve value-judgments that go beyond descriptive observations. For example, the following questions transcend the descriptive paradigm and enter into the realm of values and presuppositions: Is interreligious dialogue a "good thing," or does it lead to a syncretism of religions? Should scholars simply describe the history, sociology, and philosophy of dialogue, or may they promote interreligious dialogue in society? Is it proper for scholars of religion to participate in interreligious dialogue from their own religious convictions, or should they always remain detached and objective?

Many scholars argue that the academic study of religion must remain value-free at all times, but in my view these scholars are mistaken. As we have seen, all scholarship involves implicit or explicit value positions, which are inherent in the theoretical models utilized. Whether we like it or

not, values are integrated into the education process and cannot be avoided. Thus, I suggest that scholars ought to refocus their attention on what multicultural values are edifying in the academy instead of advocating the status quo of academic impartiality. It would be foolish to ignore the need for value-judgments in academic study. It has been said that if we do not know our history we are bound to repeat it. Scholarship does not exist in an ethical vacuum. Scholars need to make value-judgments about slavery, Antisemitism, and racism, for example. Fighting racism and Antisemitism are not merely the tasks of others but the tasks of us all, and such vigilance must be continued by every generation.

Interreligious dialogue, too, needs to be undertaken perennially as preventative medicine to avoid bloodshed in the name of religion. Scholars must be critical of current religious atrocities as well as atrocities committed in the past. Speaking out against genocide and Antisemitism are tasks within a scholar's duty. Consequently, it vexes me when I come across those scholars who insist that the academic study of religion must be value-free. Actually, their own position is self-refuting upon closer analysis, because it is already a value-statement. In other words, those scholars who insist that the academic study of religion ought to be value-free on the grounds that scholarship should remain impartial are contradicting themselves because their own statement is prescriptive.

The time has come to move beyond debating whether prescriptive studies are valid in academic discourse. Today, the question is not whether prescriptive studies are legitimate but what cross-cultural values are best suited for education in our pluralistic world. The study of interreligious dialogue offers many insights to help answer this question, because dialogue is an established form of cross-cultural communication.

We saw earlier that the academic study of religion began as "scientific" enterprise but has grown to encompass prescriptive approaches to religion in addition to cold, objective analysis. One pioneer of the prescriptive approach was Friedrich Heller, who justified the transformation of religious studies from a purely scientific enterprise into a humanitarian one with the following metaphor:

When Helmholtz discovered the eye-mirror a century ago, he was pursuing no practical medical purpose but only a theoretical research purpose. But through his research zeal he brought help to millions who suffer with eye-disease. The same is true of the scientific study of religion. Its inquiry into truth bears important consequences for the practical relationship of one religion to another. [17]

In a public lecture, Heller expressed the hope that a "new era will dawn upon mankind when the religions will rise to true tolerance and co-operation on behalf of mankind," and it was his opinion that to "assist in preparing the way for this era is one of the finest hopes of the scientific study of religion." [18] I agree with him, and his vision has been shared by other famous scholars of religion, such as Rudolf Otto, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Joachim Wach. [19] These scholars all argued that prescriptive studies of religion are valid in the academic context-and even a scholar's responsibility.

Accordingly, it gives me great solace today to see that prescriptive studies are now widely accepted in academic scholarship. It is now common to see scholars arguing that affirmative action is right, that Orientalism is wrong, and that feminism is liberating. While not everyone may agree with these views, I have argued that prescriptive studies are healthy and valid in the academic domain, for they provoke thought and generate debate. The prescriptive study of interreligious dialogue, too, is correspondingly valid and healthy in religious studies. Whether we like it or not, relating to our neighbors is a matter of basic survival in our interdependent world. Consequently, students must learn how to communicate with followers of different religions in an attitude of dialogue if they want to avoid future conflicts and if they want to build mutual trust and understanding. Obviously, the academic study of religion can play an important role in facilitating these objectives by outlining ways to interact positively. The study of interreligious dialogue provides students with models to relate to others in a constructive way. For Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains, dialogue can be seen as a form of conceptual ahimsa where religious differences are communicated without harm. As long as the world continues to be characterized by religious pluralism and global interdependence, the prescriptive study of interreligious dialogue will be

crucial for everyone, scholars and nonscholars alike, and it has a valid place in the academic study of religion.

Recently, a Department of Interreligious Relations was founded at Madurai Kamaraj University in Tamilnadu, India, which reflects this new shift in thinking. The Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin reported:

There are universities which offer courses on Comparative Religion, but a department meant to promote positive relations among religions is indeed a novel venture from the point of view of secular universities. The aim of the new department is not purely academic but also to be a catalytic agent for bringing about communal harmony. The basic idea is promotion of cordial relations between religions.[20]

Such a venture is not limited to India, for other prestigious universities in North America and the United Kingdom are also promoting interreligious dialogue within their programs of study. John Carman has written that the Center for the Study of the World Religions at Harvard University encourages young scholars to pursue "a life-time of teaching and of scholarship in quest of interfaith understanding." [21] McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies was designed so that "half the teaching staff, half the research associates, half the students, should be Muslim, half non-Muslim," in order to facilitate interreligious dialogue as part of its program.[22] Most recently, the Elijah School for the Study of the World Religions in Jerusalem, in association with the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University, has launched an interfaith summer school that deliberately combines academic study with interfaith dialogue. Thus, the academic study of religion has come a long way from its purely "scientific" roots to offer a forum for prescriptive and dialogical learning.

VI. Experiential Study and Interreligious Dialogue

The most controversial form of studying interreligious dialogue in the academy is what I call the "experiential approach." Suffice it to say, interreligious dialogue is first and foremost an interpersonal activity, not an "arm-chair exercise," and the academic study of religion should be commensurate with this fact.[23] The best way for a scholar to learn about interreligious dialogue, if he or she is religious, is to spend time directly in dialogue and write about it from personal experience. Many scholars are personally engaged in dialogue conferences outside the walls of the university and write about their experiences inside those walls. This is a valid approach. However, are there any precedents for experiential study in the academic context? Actually, there are.

For many years, cultural anthropologists have contended that "one cannot fully understand another culture by observing it; one must experience it as well." [24] This is exactly what I am arguing in the realm of dialogue. One also cannot fully understand dialogue by observing it; one must experience it as well. The anthropological approach provides a precedent for interreligious dialogue, but most scholars are trained to teach their students that personal religious commitments have no place in the academic study of religion. Indeed, it is a cliché on the first day of classes to hear the warning that "students must suspend or bracket their personal religious beliefs in all class discussions and assignments." Of course, there are good reasons for this advice, and the practice of *epoche* [25] is very valuable in religious studies, but we must ask ourselves if bracketing religious commitments is appropriate in all academic methods of studying interreligious dialogue.

Robert D. Baird asserted, "In the academic study of religion, private (or personal) experience, no matter at what depth, or revelation as held within a particular tradition, simply does not count." [26] He argued that "when one puts *epoche* aside, one is no longer engaged in the academic study of religion." [27] It follows from Baird's position that personal religious beliefs have no place in the academic study of interreligious dialogue, regardless of their role.

In contrast, John Carman and Raimon Panikkar have argued that to understand interreligious dialogue fully, one must practice dialogue personally. They insist that personal religious beliefs are the essence of interreligious dialogue, and to bracket them would be to kill the dialogue.[28] Panikkar has written that "precisely what I should not and cannot put into brackets are my religious convictions, my ultimate evaluations, for I must approach religious dialogue without putting my most intimate self on some safe ground outside the confrontation and challenge of the dialogue." [29] He contended that the exclusion of one's religious convictions from

interreligious dialogue is just as silly as "renouncing the use of reason in order to enter a reasonable encounter." [30] I entirely agree.

The idea of temporarily suspending one's religious beliefs in order to study religion is only one approach in the methodology of religious studies, and it should not monopolize the study of interreligious dialogue. Indeed, Sharpe has reminded us that the field of religious studies was "never intended to provide a single methodological pattern for the study of religion" but to be "an organisational canopy" under which a diverse number of methods and approaches could be sheltered. [31] Therefore, I disagree with the view that personal religious commitments can never contribute to academic studies, and I am pleased to note that the American Academy of Religion, the largest professional organization of religious-studies scholars in the world, has recently revised its mission statement to affirm that both scholarly detachment and religious commitments can play an important role in religious studies. [32]

Klaus Klostermaier seems to have been right when he suggested that the practice of interreligious dialogue requires its own unique method. He wrote:

Obviously the study of religion under historical, sociological, psychological, and other such perspectives does not exhaust the possibilities of studying the subject. More important, these methods leave out the issues closest to the heart of these traditions. The issues of enlightenment and justification, of self-realization and salvation are not entered into by any of the other methodologies. These are the issues that are the most personal ones, and only the most personal method will touch on them: dialogue.

Why should it be "scientific" to make educated guesses about Gautama Buddha's height, weight, and diet-matters which he found not worth talking about--whereas it is "unscientific" to attempt to find out the meaning of his dhamma, the very substance of what he lived for? For too long we have been misguided by notions of "scientific" as concerning only what can be touched, measured, and weighed. [33]

Accordingly, this section has argued that what Klostermaier calls "the method of dialogue" is another valid form of studying interreligious dialogue in the academy. I have argued that all three forms--descriptive, prescriptive, and experiential study -- are valid and useful in academic discourse. Descriptive study is useful because it records and documents the dialogue process for present and future generations. Prescriptive study introduces students to more thought-provoking questions, such as: Can interreligious dialogue play a role in resolving religious conflicts and healing past injustices? Can insights on "truth" arise in dialogue? Can interreligious dialogue help liberate groups from religious oppression? Finally, experiential study helps students to understand the dynamics of interreligious dialogue in a more existential way that has practical implications for their own lives. Thus, all the above approaches to dialogue have a place in the academic study of religion.

VII. Responsible Academic Dialogue

The case has been made that practicing interreligious dialogue in the academy is a legitimate activity. We must now consider how scholars can engage in interreligious dialogue in a responsible way. Several guidelines have been proposed by other to standardize the practice of interreligious dialogue, and any scholar planning to engage in interreligious dialogue should consult them for the etiquette of dialogue. [34]

The well-known guidelines of dialogue state clearly that interreligious dialogue is not a debate where one side tries to outshine the other; rather, dialogue is a team effort where both sides see each other as partners in the common quest for greater knowledge, social action, or whatever they may seek. Thus, interreligious dialogue is both a relational activity and an attitude. The proper attitude of dialogue is just as important as its relational dimension. This "proper attitude" was defined above as a common attitude of open-mindedness and mutual respect. Open-mindedness presupposes a willingness to learn and grow from the dialogue partner's views and perhaps even to transform during, or in response to, the process. Thus, the proper attitude of dialogue is a prerequisite for a scholar to be able to engage in interreligious dialogue.

Given the cross-cultural nature of interreligious dialogue, it is also appropriate that scholars welcome Eastern pedagogical approaches to the topic.[35] For example, if a Buddhist monk wants to sit and meditate as the best way to "communicate" the teachings of Buddhism to a Western scholar, then that scholar should accept the monk's approach instead of belittling it as nonacademic. In other words, scholars should be open to a plurality of methods and languages used to study dialogue, provided that these methods are not morally offensive to the participants.

A short digression is in order. The above comments about the Buddhist monk raise the question: With whom should scholars engage in dialogue? In my view, scholars should enter into dialogues with the greatest breadth of participants possible--that is, not only with other scholars but also with laypersons who have the requisite attitude of dialogue. I agree with John Cobb that the principles of openness and inclusiveness should govern interreligious dialogue.[36] Others disagree with this broad view and argue that interreligious dialogue should take place only between equals, but their concept of equality is vaguely defined.[37] In my opinion, scholars should be open to learning from anyone, including children, despite obvious disparities in knowledge. It is unnecessary for two people to have an "equality of qualifications or knowledge" for a dialogue between them to be insightful. University professors, for example, can still learn much from their students if their discussions are dialogical rather than monological. Dale T. Irvin has pointed out that the practice of dialogical teaching involves students as co-participants in the learning process. [38] If the principle of "intellectual equality" is made a precondition of interreligious dialogue, then such dialogue would become exclusionary and elitist, which, ironically, would betray the principle of open-mindedness that dialogue is supposed to epitomize. I agree that dialogue should be between equals only in the sense that all participants are equally teachers and learners.

My digression completed, the above reminders are intended to keep scholars on the bridge of dialogue instead of in the waters of debate. A scholar's religious commitments cannot be used to vilify or ridicule the religious beliefs of another person? If this happens, then the activity no longer belongs in academic studies but in the realm of apologetics and theology.[40]

This section has sought to illustrate how religious commitments can be responsibly integrated into the academic study of religion as long as they are accompanied with humility and open-mindedness. When a professor teaches a course on the world's religions, she could greatly enrich her students, for example, by sharing her own insights about what it means to be Jewish with her class. An account of her personal commitment to Judaism could well enhance her students' views on what Judaism means as a living faith; yet, at the same time, her Jewish beliefs should not jeopardize her fair description of other religions. If she can balance these two aspects, then descriptive and experiential discourse could be mutually enriching. Indeed, many graduate students concur that "their best undergraduate experiences occurred when they were taught by teachers who were passionately committed to a position (e.g., Marxism, feminism, or even a particular reading of Homer)."[41] As former A.A.R. Associate Executive Director Warren G. Frisina stated recently, "The rub is not whether we advocate [but] how we do it. All teaching is a form of advocacy, but not all advocacy engenders the educative act." [42]

VIII. Conclusion

In today's world of religious and academic pluralism, interreligious dialogue needs to move from the periphery of religious studies into the center because it can bridge interdisciplinary and cultural differences. It is foolish to ignore the growing need for interreligious dialogue in the world around us, and there are many reasons to promote its study in the academic curriculum. Not only do we live in increasing multicultural societies, but also the world is becoming more interdependent daily. Followers of other religions are no longer "exotic" and "mysterious" others but our own neighbors and sometimes even our own relatives. Therefore, dialogue with them is essential in order to overcome stereotypes and to prevent future conflicts from arising. Consequently, interreligious dialogue should not be kept on the sidelines of religious studies in the coming decades but should become a prominent pursuit of the profession--and part of its self-justification.

I have argued that one can study interreligious dialogue descriptively, prescriptively, and experientially. The most controversial form of studying dialogue is what I called the experiential approach. I argued that interreligious dialogue is first and foremost an activity and an attitude, not

an intellectual or theoretical pastime. Studying dialogue in books is useful, but it stays at the cognitive level only and does not transcend intellectual ideas. In my view, it is much more edifying to see a mountain vista with one's own eyes than to read about it in a book. One cannot feel the wisp of the mountain breeze or see the alpine meadows or sense the tremendum of the mountain peaks by merely looking at a picture. Only a direct experience of the mountain can give you the full picture, so to speak. In the same way, interreligious dialogue needs to be experienced to be fully understood. However, such an experience of interreligious dialogue requires religious commitments. I have argued that personal religious commitments are actually compatible with the academic study of religion, provided that they are balanced with open-mindedness and respect for the other person's beliefs. The theory of interreligious dialogue is not the property of Western rationalism alone but is global in scope; consequently, dogmatic claims about the method of dialogue are inappropriate. The guidelines considered in this essay help prevent the practice of interreligious dialogue from becoming a forum for polemics or proselytizing. As long as the guidelines are respected, then religious commitments are not dangerous in academic studies. In fact, they can be very enriching.

[43] In conclusion, the study of interreligious dialogue offers a new vista for religious studies. The past view that Religionswissenschaft must be detached and "objective" is outdated and dogmatic. Sharpe has reminded us that:

The study of religion must remain the meeting-ground of complementary (not competing) methods--historical, sociological, phenomenological, philosophical, psychological [and now dialogical]. Great harm has been done to the study in the past by those who have insisted that their approach excludes every conceivable alternative. Let us hope that such dogmatism is a thing of the past. Only as methods and approaches meet can we hope to understand and appreciate religion in all its complexity.[44]

I invite scholars of religion to accept the study of interreligious dialogue in its various forms, and I challenge them to abandon the credo that the only proper way to study religion is the "objective" way. A new generation of scholars has begun to explore the dialogical approach to studying religion, and they should be applauded for their efforts and creativity. The academic landscape is changing, and religious studies must also be adaptable. In today's world of religious pluralism, the study of interreligious dialogue is indispensable. Thus, let us nurture this approach and discover what new vistas of knowledge await us in dialogical study.

Notes

1 The phrase "about issues of religious significance" intends to prevent mundane conversations from being called interreligious dialogues, albeit what is deemed "significant" to the participants can change in, and between, the dialogues. Thus, a conversation between a Muslim and a Jew about politics might, or might not, be deemed an "interreligious dialogue," depending on the attitude of the participants and whether they consider the political issues discussed to be "religiously significant."

2 The questions, "What is truth?" and "Is truth discovered, created, or revealed in dialogue?" are too complicated to be addressed here. Those interested in such issues should consult the following sources: David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); John Hick, ed., *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth Claims* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974); and Hendrick M. Vroom et al., *Religions and the Truth: Philosophical Reflections and Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989).

3 Gautama's Nyaya Sutras state that "to obtain release" it is necessary to enter into dialogues with "unenvious persons, such as disciples, preceptors, fellow-students and seekers of the bonum" (Bk. 4, chap. 2, vs. 47-48, in B. D. Basu, *The Sacred Books of the Hindus*, vol. 8, *The Nyaya Sutras of Gotama* [Allahabad: Sudhindranatha Vasu, 1913], p. 138).

4 The focus of this essay is on the pedagogical role of interreligious dialogue in religious studies, not on the historical development of interreligious dialogue in the academic study of religion. For the history of interreligious dialogue in the West, see Richard Hugh Seager, ed., *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1993); Charles Wei-hsun and Gerhard E. Spiegel, eds., *Religious Issues and Interreligious Dialogues: An Analysis and Sourcebook of Developments since 1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989), pp. 327-348; and Arnulf Camps, *Partners in Dialogue: Christianity and Other World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

5 Some notable exceptions are Robert D. Baird, "Hindu-Christian Dialogue and the Academic Study of Religion," in Harold Coward, ed., *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 217-229;

John Carman, "Inter-Faith Dialogue and the Academic Study of Religion," in S. J. Samartha, ed., *Dialogue between Men of Living Faiths* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1971), pp. 81-86; and Klaus K. Klostermaier, "Interreligious Dialogue as a Method for the Study of Religion," *J.E.S.* 21 (Fall, 1984): 755-759.

6 Gavin D'Costa, "Whose Objectivity? Which Neutrality? The Doomed Quest for a Neutral Vantage Point from which to Judge Religions," *Religious Studies* 29 (March, 1993): 79-95.

7 Robert E. Murphy, *Cultural and Social Anthropology: An Overview*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), pp. 250-251.

8 The operative word here is "persons." I.e., Smith has rejected studying persons as "objects" but he has accepted, for better or for worse, the objective study of "nature."

9 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*, Library of Philosophy and Religion (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 58.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

13 It is interesting to note that the inherent dualism of objective study is directly opposed to Buddhist forms of pedagogy, which aim at transcending the subject-object dichotomy.

14 Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, pp. 57, 77.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

16 Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986), p. 271.

17 As cited in *ibid.*, p. 272.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Sharpe states that Radhakrishnan "unhesitatingly identified the concerns of comparative religion with the concerns of world peace, international harmony and universal brotherhood" (*ibid.*, p. 258; cf. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940]).

20 A. Pushparajan, "A University Department for Interreligious Affairs," *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin*, vol. 8 (1995), p. 54.

21 John Carman, "Inter-Faith Dialogue and the Academic Study of Religion," in Samartha, *Dialogue between Men*, p. 84.

22 Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, p. 98.

23 By "arm-chair exercise" I mean a purely cognitive or theoretical pastime that does not involve the participant at an existential level. I am not saying, however, that all academic topics must be experienced to be fully understood. A pharmacy student does not need to try drugs, e.g., to gain a better understanding of their effects.

24 William A. Haviland, *Anthropology*, 5th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1989), pp. 22-23 (his emphasis).

25 "Epoche" is the technical term for the bracketing of one's personal religious beliefs in the academic study of religion in order to remain "neutral" and "impartial." The concept derives from Husserl's *Phenomenology of Religion*, which emphasizes "the need to abstain from every kind of value-judgement, to be 'present' to the phenomenon in question purely as an impartial observer, unconcerned with questions of truth and falsehood" (Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p. 224).

26 Robert D. Baird, "Hindu-Christian Dialogue and the Academic Study of Religion," in Harold Coward, ed., *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 222.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

28 Carman, "Inter-Faith Dialogue," pp. 81-86; Raymond Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 46.

29 Panikkar, *Intrareligious Dialogue*, p. 50.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p. 298 (his emphasis).

32 The American Academy of Religion's mission statement reads: "Within a context of free inquiry and critical examination, the Academy welcomes all disciplined reflection on religion from both within and outside of communities of belief and practice and seeks to enhance its broad public understanding" (Barbara DeConcini, "Executive Director's Report to the AAR Board of Directors, November, 1996," *Religious Studies News* 12 [February, 1997]: 3; emphasis mine). Nevertheless, Baird's article is valuable because it forces scholars to recognize the dangers in bringing personal religious beliefs into the academic framework, but his article ignores Panikkar's important critique of epoche found in two separate sources; Raimundo Panikkar, "The Internal Dialogue: The Insufficiency of the So-Called Phenomenological 'Epoch' in the Religious-Encounter," *Religion and Society*, vol. 15, no.3 (1968), pp. 55-66; and *idem*, *Intareligious Dialogue*.

33 Klaus K. Klostermaier, "Interreligious Dialogue as a Method for the Study of Religion," *J.E.S.* 21 (Fall, 1984): 759.

34 E.g., see Leonard Swidler, "Dialogue Decalogue," in *J.E.S.* 20 (Winter, 1983): 1-4 (September, 1984, revision); and Paul Mojzes, "The What and How of Dialogue," in M. Darrol Bryant and Frank Flinn, eds., *Interreligious Dialogue: Voices from a New Frontier* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), pp. 199-206.

35 Correspondingly, is it wrong for anglophone scholars to presume that all interreligious dialogues should be carried out in English. A Hindu-Christian dialogue, e.g., could be carried out in Hindi, Tamil, or another Indian language or in two completely different languages. The dialogue partners should avoid imposing their own language on the other as the lingua of the dialogue.

36 John B. Cobb, Jr., "Response 1," in Leonard Swidler, John B. Cobb, Jr., Paul F. Knitter, and Monika Hellwig, *Death or Dialogue? From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 84. Nevertheless, I also believe that there are ethical limits to interreligious dialogue and with whom scholars should engage in dialogue, but, unfortunately, this topic is too large to be addressed here and must be dealt with in another article.

37 The whole concept of "equality" is problematic upon closer inspection. So called "equality" can actually create greater inequalities, depending on one's perspective. For more information on the ambiguity of equality, see Douglas Rae, *Equalities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

38 See Dale T. Irvin, "Open-Ended Pedagogy in a Multicultural Classroom: The Case for Theological Education," in the A.A.R.'s *Spotlight on Teaching*, vol. 4 (February, 1996). One of the best books I have read on how to teach dialogically is Reuel L. Howe's *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: Seabury Press, 1963).

39 However, constructive criticism of another person's religious beliefs is healthy and acceptable. One can respect another person's religion immensely but still find certain practices, teachings, or aspects of that religion warranting criticism. As stated earlier, I believe there are ethical limits to interreligious dialogue.

40 Most scholars feel that polemics and proselytizing are antithetical to dialogue, but some do contend that missionizing is a valid part of the dialogue process. The former view is held by Leonard Swidler, Paul Mojzes ("The What and How"), and David Lochhead (*Dialogical Imperative*). The latter view is held by Rodney Sawatsky in his "In Defense of Proselytizing: A Contribution towards Interfaith Dialogue," in John W. Miller, ed., *Interfaith Dialogue: Four Approaches* (Waterloo, ON: University of Waterloo Press, 1986). pp. 81-96.

41 Susan Henking, "Proselytizing and Pedagogy, or Advocacy in the Classroom," *Religious Studies News* 11 (February, 1996): 8.

42 Cited in *ibid*. Cf. Patricia Meyer Spacks, ed., *Advocacy in the Classroom: Problems and Possibilities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

43 Many other scholars concur with my assessment that religious commitments are compatible with academic studies. The following scholars affirm that explicit religious commitments can be very edifying in a pedagogical context: Michael Grimmitt, "When Is 'Commitment' a Problem in Religious Education?" *British Journal of Educational Studies* 29 (February, 1981): 42-53; cf. John M. Hull, "Open Minds and Empty Hearts?" in Robert Jackson, ed., *Approaching World Religions* (London: John Murray Ltd., 1982), p. 101-110; Robert Jackson, "Commitment and the Teaching of World Religions," in Jackson, *Approaching*, pp. 89-100.

44 Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p. 293.

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