Interreligious Dialogue: Conversations That Enable Christian Witness

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For over thirty years now I have participated in a dialogue group in the United States called the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies (SBCS). The society, now with about 400 members, meets for two days prior to the annual American Academy of Religion meetings in late November. Meetings consist of two three-hour sessions where Buddhists and Christians present papers or lead discussions on topics of common interest.[1]

I have been an active participant. In addition to attending every year, I have presented papers, I served for a number of years as the chair of the nominating committee, I rewrote, revised, and edited the society's by-laws, and for ten years I was the editor of *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, the society's annual journal, published by the University of Hawai'i Press. I have just begun a four-year term that will include serving successively as program chair, vice president, and president.

I have participated as an evangelical Christian, a position shared by only a handful of the Christians in SBCS. Most of my fellow Christians are convinced that one must be a liberal Christian in order to properly dialogue. And although the Buddhists use different nomenclature, it is safe to say that Buddhist participants also come from a certain approach to Buddhism drawn from educated, globalized groups. Many of the Buddhist participants are Western converts from Christianity.

My experience in this group has taught me many things about interreligious dialogue and Christian mission, in particular: (1) how interreligious dialogue is defined and the place it has vis-à-vis other modes of Christian interaction with Buddhists; (2) a realistic definition of dialogue; and (3) an outline of what I will call a missional theology of dialogue. Throughout this article I use Buddhist-Christian dialogue as my primary case, but I think the lessons I relate can be generalized to relationships with Hindus and Muslims as well.

Issues in the Practice of Interreligious Dialogue

When people speak of "interreligious dialogue," it is difficult to know with any precision what they are referring to. As Harold Netland has noted, "There is no general agreement today on just what is meant by dialogue";[2] everyone seems to come to the dialogue table with a different set of theological or buddhalogical or vedic assumptions. These assumptions determine the goals one sets for dialogue and thus go a long way toward determining one's definition of dialogue. In attempting to address this problem of defining interreligious dialogue satisfactorily, we can go in one of two directions.

We can use a detailed definition of dialogue that is meant to accommodate as many participants as possible from as many religions as possible. This approach seeks a wide scope for dialogue (every interaction among religious people should be dialogical), even as it makes more precise the theological/buddhalogical/vedic preconditions for "proper dialogue." Ironically, however, the theological precision of the guidelines actually decreases dramatically the actual number of people who can participate in dialogue.

The second direction one can go is to set as few preconditions as possible (as few theological assumptions as possible) and restrict the scope of dialogue to a narrower set of functions. The focus in this kind of definition is much smaller (only some of the interactions among religious people are dialogical), yet because very few theological presuppositions are insisted upon, almost anyone who wants to participate can do so. Almost all theological assumptions are allowed, as are many different goals for the dialogue. In this scenario, what makes something dialogue is not theological preconditions or acceptable/unacceptable goals but the actual process that takes place among dialoguers.

To illustrate this distinction, I use my experience with Buddhist-Christian dialogue. One of the most active participants in this dialogue over the years has been Paul Ingram, a liberal Lutheran Christian, who has become a good friend. One of the things I have discovered, by the way, is that, for me as a Christian, the dialogue with Buddhists in SBCS is primary, but almost as important is the dialogue created between me as an evangelical Christian with the liberal Christians drawn to this encounter. My interaction with Paul is a good illustration of this. Let me assure you that what I am about to say is something Paul and I have discussed many times, so I am not telling tales out of school.

It has become obvious to me that Paul Ingram and I have very different understandings of what dialogue is. I summarize part of his definition by quoting from his thoughtful book *The Process of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (2009).[3] At the outset (pp. ix–x) he posits four conditions as the minimum necessary for a person to be involved in proper dialogue:

- lack of any ulterior motives
- openness to change
- religious expertise
- truth, understood as relational, seen as the goal of dialogue

Before dealing with each of these four conditions in more detail, consider two general comments. First, very few religious people, Christian or otherwise, can satisfy these four conditions, so the pool of possible participants in interreligious dialogue following these guidelines becomes small indeed. Second, as an evangelical Christian, I find myself shut out of the dialogue these conditions would allow—yet I am sure Paul is pleased that I as an evangelical have participated for thirty years in SBCS. So this issue needs some clarification.

The first requirement is that a person involved in interreligious dialogue must have no ulterior motives. One does not have to search far to discover the ultimate ulterior motive being referred to here: the mission motive, the desire to see people of other religions switch camps and become part of my religious community. As

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Paul Ingram puts it, "Engaging in dialogue in order to convert persons to one's own particular faith tradition is a monologue, not a dialogue." More precisely, "Comparing Buddhist doctrine and practice with Christian doctrine and practice in order to evangelize Buddhists undermines the integrity of Christian and Buddhist tradition."[4] As an evangelical Christian, I must admit I have what Paul Ingram calls this missionary ulterior motive. I think most Christians have it. To be honest, I think most Buddhists also have this as an ulterior motive. And I would turn Paul's second comment on its head and say that what undermines the integrity of both the Christian and the Buddhist traditions is the failure to see that they are both essentially missionary in nature; to try to minimize this feature is to misunderstand both traditions badly. If nothing else, dialogue is an attempt to understand one another's faith traditions accurately, not through the eyes of a small minority who wish their religious traditions were not what they have historically been and currently are.

Dialogue is only one way of many possible ways of relating to people of other religious traditions.

The second requirement, regarding openness to change, is one I am very sympathetic to. As a theological educator, I believe the teaching and learning dynamic is based on an expectation of change, that a student (and a teacher, for that matter) who does not change over the course of an educational encounter is either a bad student or poorly taught. But why eliminate people from the process of dialogue (where they may inadvertently learn and change) just because they think they do not need to learn and change? What is the point of that? Isn't part of the magic of dialogue that people who become involved, even if a bit reluctantly, suddenly find themselves seeing their own religious tradition in a deeper and richer way (not to mention how they might come to see the other person's religious tradition)? Why say that people are not really dialoguing if they cannot achieve some abstract, unachievable level of openness, supposedly eliminating or putting on hold all firm commitments to their own tradition? Is that even possible, much less desirable?

The third requirement I also find problematic. How many people understand their own religious tradition satisfactorily, much less the religious traditions of others? Let me be graphic. How many of you would feel comfortable picking at random any person from the Sunday morning congregation with which you worship and entrusting him or her with the task of giving an accurate, authoritative summary of the teachings and practices of Christianity? Yet Paul Ingram is requiring that, in order for dialogue to be engaged properly, participants must have an accurate, critical, and articulate understanding of two religious traditions—their own and that of their dialogue partner. This sets the bar so high as to be almost unreachable for anyone but trained theologians and religious studies personnel. Is dialogue supposed to be that esoteric an endeavor?

Finally, the fourth requirement, that persons involved in interreligious dialogue see it as a quest for truth, enlarges the scope of dialogue to a width and breadth that it simply cannot bear. No matter how one defines truth, dialogue—especially with the requirements set forth here—is ill equipped to discover it. If one cannot bring firm commitments to the dialogue table, then out the window go rational authorities, warrants, appeals to logic (whatever logical system one might choose), or anything resembling cognitive thought. It does no good to redefine truth in relational terms, limiting it strictly to the affective dimension,[5] because human affect is shot through with what Paul Ingram would call ulterior motives. Of course we would all reject the ulterior motives of hate, greed, revenge, proselytism, and so forth.[6] But are we not also being asked to eliminate compassion, altruism, love, and other equally desirable affects? Are they not also ulterior motives?

The problem with these types of definitions of dialogue is the implied understanding that dialogue is a way of relating to people of other religious traditions that replaces all other ways of relating to them. It certainly is expected to replace missional ways of relating. But perhaps unwittingly it is also, defined this way, being called upon to replace disagreement, debate, and a host of other modes of relating that characterize any relationships between people of different religious traditions. It makes dialogue far too big an activity.

Better, I think, to cut dialogue down to size. I suggest we create an understanding of dialogue that recognizes it as just one of a large number of interactive modes we have with people of other religious traditions—a very important mode, to be sure, but not the only mode. Let's define dialogue in such a way that it can be seen as an activity that does accomplish something indispensable in furthering good relationships with people of religious traditions not their own. By creating this smaller scope for dialogue, we open up the possibility of many, many more people being involved in it. And for those of us who are evangelical Christians, it goes a long way toward making interreligious dialogue an endeavor that has theological warrant.

Six Modes of Interreligious Interchange

I remember well one annual meeting of SBCS. The theme was comparative looks at Gautama Buddha and Jesus Christ. Three Buddhist-authored papers on Buddhist views of Jesus and three Christian-authored papers on Christian views of Gautama were read.[7] In the discussion that followed, the observation was made (accurately, I would say) that, in the papers, the Christians were far more charitable and admiring of the Buddha than the Buddhists were of the Christ. A lengthy back-and-forth discussion then developed about whether or not a double standard operated in our society—it was OK for Buddhists to be critical of Christianity, but not OK for Christians to be critical of Buddhism. And it was OK for Buddhists to argue for and advocate Buddhism, but not OK for Christians to argue for and advocate Christianity.

For my part in the exchange, I agreed there was a double standard, but I did not agree that the double standard should be done away with. In fact, many more standards should be introduced from both Christians and Buddhists, and everyone should feel free to express all views about both their own religion and the "other" religion. There should be many ways of relating with Buddhists and Christians, not just a single way, the impossibly idealistic type of dialogue, which inhibits many other ways of relating that desperately need to be engaged.

Dialogue, then, is only one of many possible ways of relating to people of other religious traditions. Here I identify five other ways. Collectively, they demonstrate the range of possible modes and give some concrete illustrations of how cultural conditions and the intention of the Christian witnesser can influence the way we relate to people of other religions.[8]

Pronouncement: declaration of belief and intention. One very popular form of pronouncement for Christians is preaching. Buddhists also preach—they call it *bana*.[9] But pronouncement also includes activities such as teaching (especially lecturing). Perhaps the most famous New Testament example of pronouncement in the context of interreligious interaction is the apostle Paul's sermon to the Athenians (Acts 17). Paul spends a period of time in the city of Athens, learns all he can about their religious beliefs and practices, and then, when invited, uses that knowledge to tell the Gospel story. Some listeners scoff at Paul's story, some decide to give it more thought, and some choose to follow the Way.

Dialogue: a conversation in search of a conversation. It takes place primarily when people are having difficulty understanding one another. They may be using different languages or using the same words to express different meanings. Dialogue is an attempt to admit to this basic lack of meaningful conversation and to commit to trying to find a common language and common authorities in order to have meaningful communication. In the Bible, the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11) illustrates perfectly the kind of situation that needs dialogue—people speaking many different languages without understanding one another. Interreligious dialogue should be the preferred mode of interaction when people's religious worldviews, beliefs, practices, and authorities are so different that meaningful conversation is impossible.

Argumentation: verbal disagreement. People in an argument state their viewpoint with force. In the course of an argument, participants are relatively uninterested in the viewpoints and rejoinders of the other. They want to state clearly and convincingly their own viewpoint. When two people are engaged in an argument, they are not listening to the other person speak so much as using that time to formulate their next comment. What the other person says does not much affect the continued statement of one's own position. A clear scriptural example of an argument is Paul's impassioned comments to the members of the church at Galatia. Paul is exasperated with the Galatians and wants to set them straight. The language of Galatians 3–4 (including "You foolish Galatians," as one translation puts it) is characteristic of argument.

Discussion: a comparing and contrasting of religious viewpoints. Discussions are held under conditions of respect for the other person's viewpoint. They occur with the expectation that the religious other will say some things we as Christians agree with and some things we as Christians do not agree with. Unlike participants in argument, discussants listen to other persons' statements and attempt to factor them into their statements. One of the clearest examples of interreligious discussion in Scripture is Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:7–26). Jesus is respectful, interested in her viewpoints. He finds common ground but also is clear about the gift he has to offer her religiously (eternal life). When one finds commonalities in a discussion, the Christian relates it to the Gospel; when one finds differences, the Christian uses them as bridges to understanding Christian truth.

Apologetics: statements in defense of Christian truth. Apologists are not particularly interested in finding commonalities with other religions, and thus their statements and positions are most needed, and most effective, with Christian audiences. People of other religions are not particularly interested in finding out how wrong they are. Such people are rarely argued into God's kingdom; they are usually loved in. Still, apologetics is very important. A particularly clear example of apologetics occurs in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The issue was whether Gentiles needed to become Jews (i.e., become circumcised) in order to follow the Way of Jesus. After much back-and-forth talk, the council decided they did not. This is a clear statement of Christian truth regarding people of another religious tradition.

Debate: formal oral controversy. People of different religions who debate one another follow standard debating practice. They agree on a question on which they might disagree—for example, Who or what is God? Each side then makes its best case for its view of the question. And then the debaters, usually within prescribed time and format limits, respond to one another's position. The goal of debate is truth. One of the most illustrative examples of the debating spirit in Scripture is one in which words are little used. In 1 Kings 18 Elijah and the worshippers of Baal "debate" who is more powerful, Yahweh or Baal. The challenge is to see who can ignite a pile of wet wood at the behest of the god's followers. The outcome of this debate is unusually clear!

Choosing a Mode of Interaction

How do we choose from among the many modes of interaction available to us as we relate with those of other religious traditions? I admit this is most often done either unconsciously and instinctively, or in concert with one's personal preferences and gifts. Consider a question and two principles that should guide this decision.

One-way or two-way interaction? In a one-way interaction we speak and/or act in a way that expects little meaningful response from the other—more specifically, little response that would influence our future words or actions. For example, pronouncement is a one-way mode of interaction. When we preach, we are engaging in a one-way mode. We speak, others listen. Teaching and lecturing are other forms that pronouncement takes. Argument and apologetics also tend to be one-way modes of interaction. In an argument especially, there is back-and-forth talk, but very little, if any, of it influences what the persons say to each other. That is what makes it a one-way mode of interaction.

Dialogue takes place primarily when people are having difficulty understanding one another.

Contrast this with two-way modes of interaction such as dialogue, discussion, and debate. In two-way modes the way the other person responds to what we say or how we act substantially influences what we say or do next.

Although many of us prefer one or another, all are legitimate, faithful ways of interacting. Usually the social or cultural context in which we find ourselves determines which we choose. Sometimes the cultural contexts mandate that all we can have are one-way modes of interaction. For example, some situations do not allow Christians to be active in public witness, which limits the modes of interaction that can be used.

The Scriptures recognize that sometimes all we can do is witness to the Gospel in word or deed, and if the people do

not respond, we shake the dust off our feet and move on (Matt. 10:14–16; Mark 6:8–11; Luke 9:3–5). When two-way interactions are possible, however, we should seize the chance to deepen the relationships. Witness would prosper.

Commensurability. In order to select the proper mode of interaction, we must determine the level of commensurability among the participants—that is, the extent to which participants understand one another. (See table 1.) If, for whatever reason, the level of mutual understanding is low, we say that we are in a situation of incommensurability. In such a situation one can choose to make pronouncements, trusting some communication will take place (by the power of the Holy Spirit), or one can enter into dialogue, which we have defined as a conversation in search of a conversation.

Perhaps more often than we recognize, conditions are not right for a meaningful conversation, and dialogue is necessary.

Once a certain level of commensurability (understanding) is achieved, participants immediately move beyond pronouncement and dialogue to engage in either argument or discussion. Whereas the goal of pronouncement and dialogue is simply understanding, the goal of argument and discussion is to discover areas of agreement and disagreement. We have a shorthand phrase for this process in religious studies—we call it compare/contrast.

Comparing and contrasting creates a much deeper level of understanding, which in turn creates relationships with our discussion partners. Often these relationships are very good; sometimes they are not so good. But whether good or bad, they are relationships all the same, with a certain level of understanding and trust characterized by transparency. This trust and transparency allow us to engage in apologetics and debate.

Apologetics and debate, as we have seen, have truth as their goal. In both we desire to persuade the other of the truth of our faith in God and God's Gospel. But interactions of this sort require deep commensurability. And they are most effective if that mutual understanding takes place in a context of good will.[10] Which leads us to our third principle.

The law of love. As we have seen, all six of the interaction modes we have considered are legitimate, faithful, and biblical. Yet all six can also be illegitimate, unfaithful, and unbiblical. We can preach faithfully, for example, and we can preach unfaithfully. We can preach for God's glory, or we can preach to glorify ourselves. The sermons in both cases may sound or read the same. But one, delivered out of love for God and love for the people to whom we are preaching, is faithful; the other, loveless, is not.

One of the many biblical statements of the law of love is found in the Johannine letters. In 1 John 4 the identification of love as the distinguishing characteristic of God and the things of God is clear: "If we love one another, God lives in us" (v. 12). And "love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (vv. 7–8).

Love is more, however, than a simple characteristic of God. It is also something that early non-Christians noticed about Christians. "Christians are those," they said, "who love one another"[11]—by caring for the poor, the orphans, and widows, and by burying the dead of those without the social standing to warrant a proper burial.

Unless done in a spirit of love, good will, and respect, none of the six modes we have mentioned (or any other mode) qualifies as a Christian mode of interreligious interaction. The interaction may appear to be a good thing, but if it is not done in love, it is not of God.

Dealing with Incommensurability

A missional theology of dialogue is built on the assumption that missions in the twenty-first century must be built on the capacity for human beings to have meaningful conversations with one another. Often, conditions are right for these conversations to take place. In such cases, one of the other modes of interreligious interchange—discussion, debate, apologetics, and so forth—can be entered into with no problem. Dialogue as we define it is not necessary.

But sometimes, perhaps more often than we recognize, conditions are not right for a meaningful conversation. Some level of incommensurability is present, and dialogue is necessary to overcome this basic inability to understand one another. The proper ground has not been laid for having a discussion, much less a debate.

I remember one early meeting of SBCS that clearly called for dialogue. The topic of discussion had somehow worked its way around to *upaya*, a Buddhist Sanskrit word that is most often translated in English as "skillful means." As described by Buddhists, "skillful means," or using any means possible to advance the truth of dharma, sounds suspiciously like radical ethical relativism to most Christians when they are first introduced to the topic. And perhaps when lifted out and deposited unceremoniously in the context of a Christian worldview, it is radical ethical relativism. But of course a proper understanding of *upaya* requires that it be understood within its Buddhist worldview context, not an arbitrarily imposed Christian one.

Table 1. **Interreligious Interaction: Modes of Witness**

	Incommensurable	← →	*Commensurable*
One-way	Pronouncement	Argument	Apologetics
Two-way	Dialogue	Conversation	Debate

This was a perfect situation for dialogue. Incommensurability reigned. We Christians understood the English words being used to describe *upaya*, but we were missing almost everything else about it—the concept behind the words, the place *upaya* played in Buddhist spiritual practice, the overall Buddhist understanding of *upaya*. We needed dialogue about it before we could even think of any other kind of interaction.

What causes incommensurability? The simplest answer is a language barrier. If I speak only English and you speak only Hindi, we cannot communicate. We might try using hand gestures, finger pointing, mimicry, and pantomime in order to make ourselves

understood to one another. We could call this a rudimentary form of dialogue, a protodialogue, since it is a fundamental way to overcome a situation of basic incommensurability.

Beyond a language barrier, however, we can distinguish two kinds of interreligious incommensurability. One we might call Worldview Incommensurability. When the filtering systems through which we all see and interpret the world are different, we may look at the same event or idea but see very different things. A conversation about what we think is the same thing turns nonsensical. Dialogue is called for. We must take a step backward, quit talking about the event or idea per se, and ask how the other is seeing the event or idea under discussion.

Dialogue is needed because our mental filters (our worldviews) are mostly unconscious. Religious worldviews are not strictly a set of beliefs but, rather, deep structures of thought and perception that we inherit genetically and culturally and, without knowing it, live and think through. In dialogue we not only are learning about the other person's deep filters but, in the process, are raising our own to consciousness. We *talk about* our beliefs, but we *live through* our worldview. Out of this mutual worldview consciousness–raising, we hopefully build enough common ground to be able to have further discussions and debates.

A second kind of interreligious incommensurability we might call Resistance Incommensurability. This may have roots in Worldview Incommensurability, or it may exist in combination with it. Resistance Incommensurability is driven by fear, hatred, and ignorance. Its effect is to make a person not want to understand the other, or to understand the other only on one's own terms. The dynamics of Resistance Incommensurability are especially dangerous because those suffering from it think they fully understand the other (because, after all, he or she must be like me), but really they do not. Whatever knowledge they think they have is stereotypical, not real. Thus, they most often see no need for dialogue, instead preferring the one-way modes of interaction: pronouncements with no rejoinders, arguments, and apologetic statements.

As we discussed earlier, these one-way modes are clearly appropriate for certain contexts. But to be legitimate, the one-way modes must be accompanied by an accurate understanding of the other, or at least a desire for such understanding. If they are based on stereotypes or a lack of relational understanding, the one-way modes increase rather than decrease Resistance Incommensurability.

A Missional Theology of Dialogue

Christians should be involved in interreligious dialogue, for which a missional theology of dialogue is needed. Four characteristics are critical.

1. *A missional theology of dialogue is based on an orthodox recognition of God's revelation to all.* In Romans 1 Paul makes it clear that God has not left anyone, anywhere without the capacity to know of God's existence in the world. In fact, Paul says, such an understanding is hard-wired into every person's conscience. All the great historical theologians have built this understanding of God's ubiquitous presence into their systematic presentations, and many have special names for it. John speaks of the Logos (John 1:1); Justin Martyr, *logos spermatikos*; John Calvin, *sensus divinitatis*; and Martin Luther, *Deus absconditus*. My favorite is "common grace," as John Wesley understood the term. All non-Christians we talk to have already seen or been impacted by God's presence, even though they may not recognize it as such. These sensations and perceptions of the God of the Bible are sometimes unconscious and often interpreted through cultural filters that render them all but unrecognizable to us. Yet even though imperfect and by themselves incapable of leading to salvation, they are real sensations of the King of the universe. As such, they are true, an invaluable knowledge of God that needs to be shared. When we claim that we can learn from Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, this is the theological basis of that claim. It is why we fail as missioners if we fail to engage in the two-way modes of interreligious interchange. We miss the mutual learning that takes place when those whom God has created, whether Christian or not, share with each other about the *logos spermatikos*, the *sensus divinitatis*, the many evidences of God's glory and how they are affecting our lives.

Frankly, though, much of what passes for interreligious dialogue seriously misuses the doctrine of common grace. On the conservative side of the theological aisle, it is often minimized to the point that one might well wonder why we have dialogue at all. On the liberal side, it can quickly lead to a pluralism that claims salvific efficacy for every person's every religious whim. And one can see how this might easily lead to the position that dialogue is all there is. Properly understood, however—somewhere between those two theological extremes—common grace is the theological basis for doing dialogue.

2. *A missional theology of dialogue must fully embrace Christian humility.* We must always remember that "for now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12); furthermore, "blessed are the meek" (Matt. 5:5). Dialogue is based on a recognition that we do not know everything, and have much to learn. Of course, many things conspire to make us reluctant to adopt this attitude of "learner." For many of us in Western

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cultures, the need to learn is seen as a weakness, and thus we are discouraged from acknowledging it. Sometimes it seems as if this cultural trait is applied to the way we do theology. We think that admitting that we could learn something from our fellow human beings in other religious traditions would be admitting a weakness about Christianity, something that could be exploited by countermission activities.

Actually, the opposite is true. Not being willing to acknowledge our on-going need to learn—that is the weakness. As Paul points out so forcefully in his letters to the Corinthians, it is only when we admit our needs that God's inexhaustible strength can be made manifest in our own mission efforts.

Of the many ways to talk about this healthy humility and its faithfulness to Scripture, I would like to recommend one: the "critical realism" of anthropologist Paul Hiebert. In his excellent book *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts* (1999),[12] Hiebert advocates critical realism as an epistemological stance for missionaries that helps us avoid the twin dangers of extreme foundationalism, which leads to intellectual arrogance, and postmodern idealism, which leads to relativism.

Critical realism weds two principles, one a mainstay of

foundationalists, the other of postmodern relativists: (1) absolute truth does exist, and (2) humans can only know truth imperfectly. These principles lead to two important corollaries.

- The acceptance of absolute truth is axiomatic. Although we can and should marshal evidence and create theories regarding the existence of absolute truth, in the end we accept the existence of this truth through a mechanism Christians call faith.
- Although we cannot know absolute truth perfectly, it is still the standard against which we measure all truth. In the process, we can establish universal truths and universal falsehoods, however imperfectly conceived through cultural contexts and historical times.

3. *A missional theology of dialogue must be grounded in a love of neighbor.* Dialogue cannot take place in a climate of hostility but only in a climate of love. Participants in interreligious dialogue may want to know and understand the other for various reasons, but those reasons must be seasoned with love.

It is not necessary, of course, to love others in order to interact with them. The other modes of interreligious interchange—pronouncement, argument, discussion, apologetics, debate—can all be theoretically carried out among people who do not love each other. But they will all be done imperfectly, that is to say, unchristianly, without love. And dialogue especially, without love, cannot overcome incommensurability.

The need for love in human relationships applies not just to interreligious relationships but to everyday interpersonal discourse. In articulating his theory of communicative action, Jürgen Habermas claims it can take place only among people of good will. When people of good will get together, problems can be solved. Without good will the product of human interaction is defective, even irrational.

More than rationality is threatened by a lack of good will, or love. Christian theology teaches us that a lack of love in interaction produces nothing but meaningless noise (the "clanging cymbal" of 1 Cor. 13:1). We were made by God out of an impulse of divine love. We were made to love God, as well as to love one another. When we talk lovelessly, we somehow diminish not just rationality but our very humanity.

4. *A missional theology of dialogue makes known to all involved our commitment to Christian witness.* Somehow we must be clear that we understand our faith to be a universal and exclusive one.

Really there are only two other options. One is to sincerely believe that the Christian tradition is not universal and not exclusive. Many who are or want to be involved in interreligious dialogue wrongly see this rejection of historic Christian commitment to witness to be a baseline requirement of being involved in dialogue.

The second option is to not be candid about one's commitment to Christian witness, acting and talking as if it is not a commitment. Such obfuscation need not be motivated by dishonesty or by an intention to deceive. It can be done in the honest conviction that dialogue requires that we pretend we lack this commitment.

But exactly the opposite is the case. Meaningful dialogue takes place among people who are crystal clear about their strongly held convictions, whatever they are, not among people who claim some sort of preternatural openness to everything.

It is not the case that this sort of openness inhibits conversation, offends sensibilities, or stifles interaction. On the contrary, when done among people of good will, committed to a love ethic, personal candor creates an honest atmosphere, refreshed by winds of confidence. Participants may not agree with their fellow confreres, but they can feel free to be who they really are, resting in the confidence that the others in the conversation, to the best of their abilities, are also showing who they really are.

Notes

1. For a brief history of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, see *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 25 (2005). More information about society activities can be found at www.society-buddhist-christian-studies.org.
2. Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 285.
3. Paul O. Ingram, *The Process of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, Cascade Books, 2009).
4. Ibid., p. ix.
5. Relational truth is rarely described as being this dramatically restricted to the affective dimension, but I am being a bit rhetorical here to make a point.
6. Like many, I make a distinction between proselytism (attempting to shape people in our image) and evangelism (inviting people to join the quest for becoming Christlike).
7. This collection of papers was eventually published by myself and Rita Gross (my Buddhist coeditor of *Buddhist-Christian Studies*) as *Buddhists Talk About Jesus, Christians Talk About the Buddha* (New York: Continuum, 2000).
8. Buddhists have their own spectrum of views on these matters. See, for example, David Chappell's essay in Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's book *Radical Conservatism: Buddhism in the Contemporary World* (Bangkok: Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation, 1990). See also Kristen Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes Toward Religious Others* (London: Ashgate, 2005).
9. Mahinda Deegalle, *Popularizing Buddhism: Preaching as Performance in Sri Lanka* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007).
10. I have been influenced most here by Jürgen Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), where he argues that little can be achieved in rational conversation unless a basic assumption of good will exists on both sides of the discussion table.
11. Tertullian, *Apology*, chap. 39.
12. Paul Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999).

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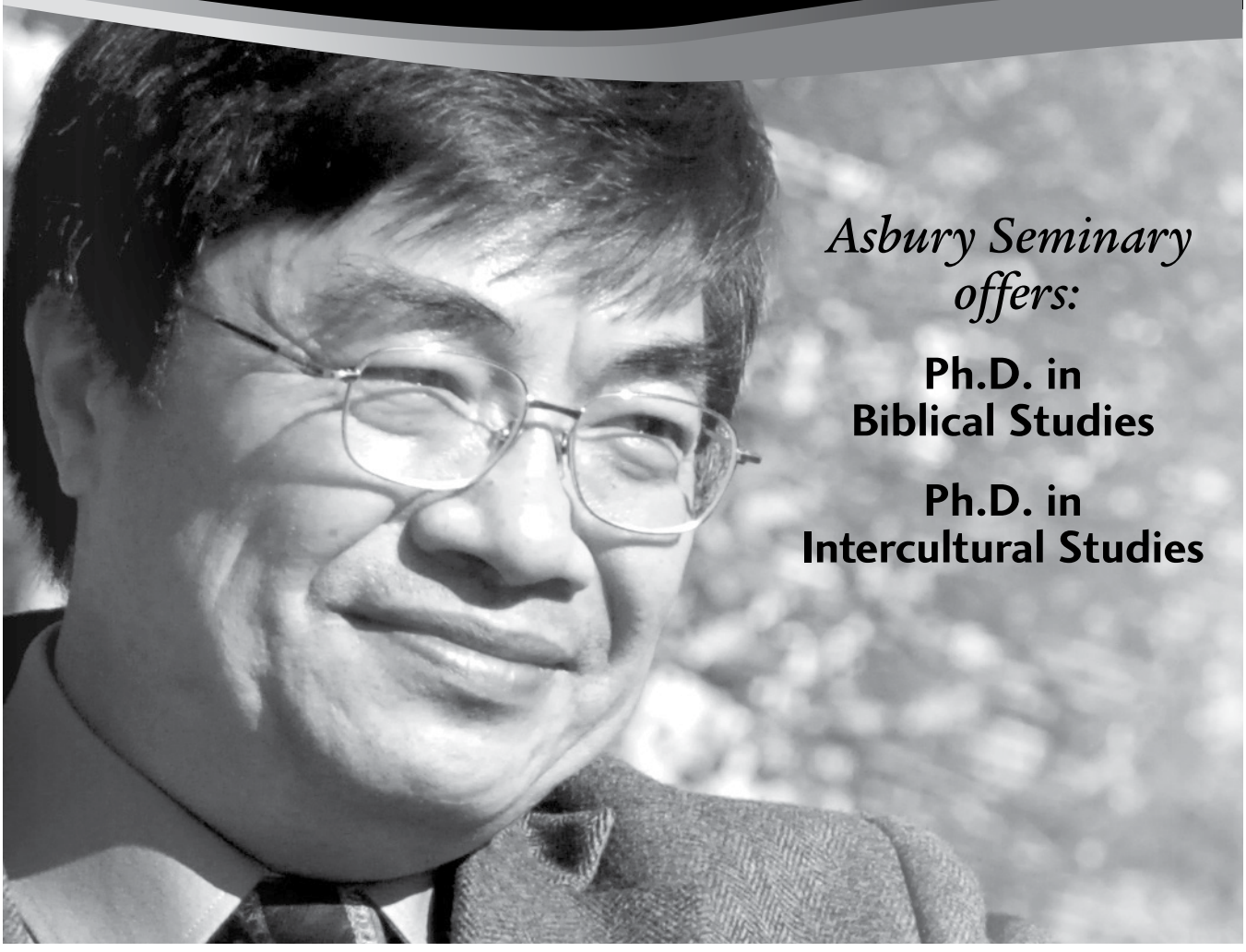

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