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Dialogical Theology and Dialogical Practice

Wolfram Weisse
University of Hamburg

Ephraim Meir
Bar-Ilan University

Abstract

This article focuses on the relationship between religions and dialogue, considering its current relevance. It shows how interreligious dialogue forms the basis for a pluralised theology. Against the backdrop of the established research project 'Religions and Dialogue in Modern Societies' (ReDi), we find an integrative approach to interreligious dialogue desirable, as it offers a means of linking three different research strands: religious studies, social sciences and education. In explaining their concept of a Dialogical Theology, the authors offer an answer to developments of global religious pluralisation. An important impulse of this approach lies in the concept of "trans-difference", anchored in Jewish philosophy. Dialogical Theology requires the counterbalance of analyses related to interreligious dialogue at the grassroot level. This endeavour, carried out with sociological methods, is called "Dialogical Practice". The article relates general ideas of a Dialogical Theology to concrete analyses of Dialogical Practice. In an imagined interreligious dialogue between the activists Abraham Joshua Heschel and Mahatma Gandhi, it shows how interreligious dialogue can contribute to a practice-oriented Dialogical Theology. Concluding remarks point to perspectives that underscore the need for further development of a Dialogical Theology with reference to Dialogical Practice.

Keywords: Dialogical Theology; Trans-difference; Dialogical Practice; Interreligious Dialogue; Heschel; Gandhi

Introduction: New interest in religion and interreligious dialogue

Interreligious dialogue has gained growing importance in the last decades – and equally, the field of religion and dialogue is in the process of profound transition. The assumption that growing secularisation would weaken religiosity, even to the point of some religions disappearing altogether, has turned out to be wrong. This is true even in France, with its long tradition of honouring the principle of laïcité (*secularity*). A new interpretation, referred to as "laïcité d'intelligence" (Debray 2002, 43), provides space to deal with religion in the public sphere, and indeed, in France religion is coming back "dans la sphère publique" (Willaime 2008). There is a growing and strong development worldwide towards religious pluralisation, which has implications for our understanding of the possibilities and limits of interreligious dialogue (Gustafson 2020). This has not counteracted ongoing secularisation but has contributed to the emergence of new discourses and constellations of actors in different fields (Weisse

2016). We are aware of the complexity and fluidity of this thematic area, which demands an international exchange of research results, such as the authors of this contribution experienced in South Africa. [1]

Regarding the university sector, notably, scientific discussions around the topic of religion–dialogue–society have increased considerably during the past twenty years, within both the Humanities and the Social Sciences (Weisse and Gutmann 2010, Pickel 2015). Religious topics are taken up not only by "insider" disciplines such as Theology or Religious Pedagogy but increasingly also by other disciplines, including Political Science, Philosophy and Sociology. To illustrate, we will use the philosopher Jürgen Habermas: in his earlier thinking, he ignored the role of religion, but from 2001 onwards he showed a strong and growing interest in the role of religion in public life and published extensively on this theme. In one of his analyses, he described interreligious tolerance as a "pacemaker for a correctly understood multiculturalism and the equitable coexistence of different cultural lifestyles" (Habermas 2005:263–264). And in his new oeuvre "Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie" ("This Too a History of Philosophy"), he qualifies religion as an indispensable "thorn in the consciousness of a secular society" and emphasises the function of migrant religion as strengthening factor for the positioning of religions in society, even for the majority religions (Habermas 2019:86–88).

An outstanding example in the field of Sociology of Religion is found in the work of Peter L. Berger of Boston University. In the 20th century, he was, for many decades, a globally acknowledged representative of secularisation theory. However, in the 1990s, his position changed. In Berger's words: "The key thesis of the secularisation theory can be expressed briefly and concisely. It is considered inevitable: The more modernity the less religion. Very smart. But – hélas – empirically untenable" (Berger in Berger, Steets, Weisse 2017:7).

In his later work, Berger went one step further, connecting the two strands (Berger 2014) and assuming societal development to be both a matter of increasing religious plurality and of progressing secularisation (Weisse & Steets 2019). Briefly expressed, his thesis is this:

> Actually, there are two pluralisms. There is religious pluralism in the usual sense of the term – several religions co-existing, more or less tolerantly, in the same society. There is also the pluralism of religion co-existing with a powerful secular discourse, without which a modern society could not exist. (Berger 2017:18).

This thesis sounds simple but has far-reaching consequences for a fundamental understanding of the field of religion, secularity, society and theology. In the following discussion, we will focus on one thematic area, which tries to contribute to such an

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[1] As Fellows of the "Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study" (STIAS), Wallenberg Research Centre at Stellenbosch University, in the first three months of 2022, we express sincere thanks to STIAS for providing us with the best possible frame for producing and discussing this text with South African colleagues and scholars in many different parts of the world. We share the authorship: Wolfram Weisse wrote the introduction, the section on Dialogical Practice and the first two paragraphs of the Summary, whereas Ephraim Meir wrote the sections on Dialogical Theology, on Heschel and Gandhi and the last two paragraphs of the summary.

endeavour: the approach of a Dialogical Theology and its relation to a Dialogical Practice.

Our research on this theme has its basis in the Academy of World Religions of Hamburg University and in the ReDi Project (Weisse 2020), to which we now turn.

The approach of the Academy of World Religions of Hamburg University, of which Weisse is the founding Director, is deliberately dialogue oriented, focusing not only on a coexistence of different religions but also on the interaction between them, especially in view of the extant dialogue orientation, the future potential for interreligious dialogue, and the contribution to peaceful living together. The Academy of World Religions devotes attention to Christianity, Islam, Judaism (Meir 2011a), Buddhism (Roloff, Weisse, Zimmermann 2021), Hinduism (Roloff and Weisse 2015) and Alevism (Aksünger and Weisse 2015), while also taking secular positions into account, especially the perspectives of religiously unaffiliated persons and institutions (Weisse 2009). This basic approach of the Academy of World Religions is a highly appropriate setting for the research project "Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies" – the "ReDi" project – where research in the thematic area of Dialogical Theology and Practice has been carried out (Weisse 2019).

The ReDi project, led by Weisse and conducted between 2013 and 2018, took up the topic of religious diversity and interreligious dialogue in an interdisciplinary and internationally comparative approach (Weisse et al. 2014 a). More than 15 researchers, 4 project leaders, and outstanding specialists from all over the (Western) world took active part in the research, so the colleagues Sallie King, Anantanand Rambachan, Peter L. Berger, Gunther Dietz, Peter Beyer, and Ephraim Meir.

Research was conducted on the following two levels:

1. The area of Dialogical Theology. Considering extant approaches of plural, intercultural and especially interreligious theology, a team of experts from different religious traditions developed elements of such a Dialogical Theology.
2. The area of Dialogical Practice. By applying methods of empirical sociology, we set out to study the beliefs about and the practices of interreligious dialogue as it exists today.

The research related specifically to metropolitan areas. Beyond the central research location of Hamburg, in Germany the Rhine-Ruhr area was also included. In other parts of Europe, studies were carried out in Scandinavia – focusing on Oslo and Stockholm – and also in London.

The research objective was to process "interreligious dialogue" by means of various disciplinary approaches regarding the basic conditions of each approach, their different uses and functions, and the impact each has on social processes of integration and peace-making (Weisse et al. 2014b).

In this contribution, we will emphasise both the theoretical approach of "Dialogical Theology" and the main results of what we call "Dialogical Practice". Thereafter, an example can shed more light on our approach: We elaborate on an imagined dialogue between Abraham Joshua Heschel and Mahatma Gandhi. At the end, we stimulate

further discussion by giving a summary and unfolding perspectives for further reflection.

Dialogical Theology and "trans-difference"

As mentioned, religions and interreligious dialogue have gained importance in the present century. In our more and more culturally diverse societies, there are multiple forms of "belonging" (Meir 2017a). We belong to our own group but also to the world, in which different groups exist. The recently deceased Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, defined being as inter-being. This is a fact and a task. Dialogue creates a shared world, a world of the "and". It strives to bring unity without dissolving singularity.

"Interreligious" dialogue aims to create bonds between religious others. While John Donne said "No man is an island", Abraham Joshua Heschel specified "No religion is an island" (Heschel 1966). In interreligious dialogue, incommensurable particularity and reaching out to others go together. Sharing is as important as living one's own culture. Such an openness may create a "new we" that is not opposed to "they".

In the relatively new perspective of Dialogical Theology, one appreciates the unique contribution of religious others (Meir 2011a; 2011b; 2013; 2015; 2017b; 2019; 2021). "Trans-difference" constitutes the heart of this theology. It brings together diversity and unity. In "trans-difference", one makes connections and has contact with others, one communicates and bridges, not in spite of differences, but thanks to them. Because we live in *one* world, we are able to reach out to others, to feel with them and create a common world in favour of the good of all.

Dialogical Theology brings a new consciousness of the interdependence of all religions in view of a more peaceful society (Amirpur, Knauth, Roloff and Weisse 2016). The underlying idea is that if religions are not for the world, they remain perhaps high and magnificent trees, but ones without fruit. Religions have a soteriological function. Emphasis is upon the moral quality present in the various responses to the inconceivable Reality. Dialogical Theology promotes a between-space, which contributes to pluralist and peaceful societies.

Inspiration

Dialogical Theology can be inspired by Buber and Levinas. In Buber's *I and Thou*, the meeting between human beings brings the Divine into perspective. In being present for each other, human beings become conscious of the presence of the eternal Thou (Buber 1970:123). In Buber's believing humanism, the dialogue with God flourishes within the inter-human dialogue (Buber 1970:57). Reminiscent of a biblical way of expression, he writes: "In the beginning is relation" (Buber 1970:69). Being present and making present come before knowledge and experience (Buber 1970:63). The context of the meeting precedes the objective content of those who meet (Buber 1970:69).

Levinas is the second philosopher who could be inspirational in constructing a Dialogical Theology. He famously describes the approach of the "face" as ethical (Levinas 1985: 83-92). The face is not an object of perception; it leads "beyond" and commands: "Thou shalt not kill". In the infinite movement towards the other, one is in contact with Infinity, which cannot be contained in the finite. One "testifies" to the

Divine in acknowledging the other (Levinas 1991:147–152). According to Levinas (1991:87), "nearness" to the other is an ethical obligation coming from the other, who "orders me before being recognized". The command to love the neighbour is the command to bring alterity in the I by proximity to the other. It is the rupture of one's totality by the "infinity" of the ethical demand that characterises the face of the other.

Dialogical Theology as the reflection on a plurality of faiths is practice oriented, contextual and open ended. It explores the conditions for dialogue, in which partners learn from each other, while also appreciating and criticising each other. It is a novel way of relating to different religious groups in society and admitting that exclusivism, inclusivism and tolerance are problematic or insufficient.

Characteristics of a Dialogical Theology

Inspired by Buber and Levinas, we can distinguish a few characteristics of Dialogical Theology. A first characteristic consists of *being present* to the religious other as far as possible without preconceived ideas. Agenda-less presence diminishes one's bias towards the other and invites her to be fully present and ready to communicate. Being present to the other in the interreligious dialogue comes before any knowledge and experience. Recognition precedes cognition. In hospitality, fear of the other is replaced by welcoming her in her concrete, embodied existence.

A second characteristic of Dialogical Theology consists of the *readiness to learn*. Being in contact with religious others can enrich us and open up unexpected horizons. So for instance, Buddhists may learn from the Jewish active engagement in the world, whereas Jews may learn from Buddhists to cultivate a tranquil mind. Hindus could teach religious others who perceive the Divine as masculine that one can also relate to the Divine as feminine. The encounter between humans and God can be lived in the non-dualism of Advaita Vedanta or in a classical dualism as in the traditional monotheistic religions.

Humility is the third component of Dialogical Theology. Confronted with religious others, one can become conscious that one's own viewpoint is only one viewpoint in the colourful mosaic of approaches to the Ultimate Reality. The tendency to shape one's own religious identity on the negative background of other religions has to be unlearned. The Divine is approached from different viewpoints, which all have their own legitimacy. This necessarily entails the adoption of a multi-perspective disposition. Different religions are different ways of approaching the unobtainable and indescribable Transcendence. Religions are, in Zen Buddhist parlance, only the "fingers" that point to the moon, or in Muslim parlance, God is "greater" (*akbar*).

A fourth characteristic of interreligious theology, closely related to the preceding one, lies in the *abandonment of absolute truth claims*. In dialogue, one recognises and appreciates that religious others have their own way to the Ultimate Reality. This implies that one gives up superiority claims. In a positive approach to religious others, one values their specific religious worldview. The dialogical turn in religious study and practice is incompatible with absolute truth claims. In the light of a Dialogical Theology, there is no superior or single true path to salvation. All are asked to develop compassion and love and to promote life in all its forms.

Religions participate in the divine Truth, which they cannot ultimately reach. In what is called a negative theology, it is denied that one can possess knowledge of

God's essence. Such a theology is to be found, for example, in Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*. The apophatic tradition avoids any identity between human knowledge and divine Truth. The infinite is not reducible to the finite; the ultimate is inconceivable, beyond our perceptions of it. The word of the Psalm "Truth will sprout from the earth" (Ps. 85:12) implies that truth does not come from heaven. Humans have to seek truth, which "sprouts from the earth", in ongoing ethical dialogue with others. This makes our own truth relative; it is not heavenly Truth. Truth grows between people in interconnection that brings peace. It is born in dialogue. One *does* the truth in searching for a meaningful life and for border-crossing values.

Dialogical Theology therefore unites people of different cultures and religions without becoming a meta-religion that does not respect distinctiveness and plurality. It respects the otherness of the other's narrative, which will not remain totally other but will be included in a common world that results from interaction between different cultures and religions. Dialogical Theology desires to bring a change in society by celebrating plurality and unity. It follows Gandhi's words: "Be the change you want to see."

Dialogical Practice

The second level of our research on "Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies", as mentioned earlier, was directed at better understanding societal and educational development in the metropolitan areas of London, Oslo, Stockholm, Rhine-Ruhr and Hamburg. This part of the research project was considered important as a counterbalance to the part considering Dialogical Theology, since it could work out an analytical understanding of concrete reflections and actions in religious communities, in societies, and in education. Relying on qualitative sociological methods, we carried out work on the possibilities and limitations of interreligious dialogue in urban settings, including educational ones. In the following discussion, we focus on results from the urban areas.

General findings

In summary, our research results were as follows (Ipgrave et al. 2019; Ipgrave 2019a):

1. The *great significance of social factors* for religions and interreligious dialogue became clear. This was especially emphasised by the fact that religions are embedded in complex social contexts and that religious diversity intersects with other forms of diversity such as age, culture, class, race and gender. The analyses of data collected in London particularly show this.
2. *Interreligious activities were more prevalent in minority communities* with fewer resources and less influence than the major Christian churches. This became clear in the analyses carried out in Hamburg. The discrepancy between activity and resources applies especially to the Muslim communities, which demonstrate a high degree of engagement in the societal and interreligious fields.
3. The dimension *Interreligious Relationships as a Social Capital Building Resource* was especially dealt with in Oslo, where on the one hand, interreligious dialogue was demonstrated to be a product of growing social

capital, and on the other hand, existing interreligious activities seemed to stimulate a lasting development and spread of social capital among actors.

4. The *Spatial Dimension of Interreligious Activities* investigated in case studies in seven locations with interreligious activities showed how physical and geographical realities are connected to subjective interpretation, experience and ideology. Taking diversities into account, the studies showed how nearness and familiarity demonstrate the potential for contributing to "normalised" encounters with difference, thereby also promoting concerns about or visions of a better society.
5. The findings on the dimension *Function of Religious Thought in Interreligious Activities* show that religious actors used religious thought selectively and strategically, depending on the objectives, dynamics and participants in the different activities. Social and political considerations influenced the use of religious thought in interreligious contexts. Religious communities might even enter into interreligious dialogue in spite of their own rather closed theological position. In this regard, an orthodox Jewish congregation in London initiated dialogue with a Muslim community, giving the main reason for this action as the desire to get public acknowledgement in a situation where the membership of the Jewish congregation had dramatically declined, to the point of endangering its continued existence (Ipgrave 2019c:268).
6. The last dimension, *Urban Management of Religious Diversity,* was predominantly researched in Hamburg where we demonstrated newer forms of "state-interfaith governance". Hamburg, as one of the 16 federal states of Germany, signed contracts with not only churches but also with the Jewish and Muslim communities. The state thereby publicly acknowledged religious communities while also articulating tasks they had to fulfil according to the contracts, thereby demanding – especially from the Muslim communities – a deliberate positioning in a democratic society.

Specified results, focusing on the relevance of trust, on common action, and on the ambivalent function of religion

One of the most important factors of dialogical practice, analysed in the empirical studies of all metropolitan areas, is the development of trust (Ipgrave 2019c:263). Good neighbourliness and shared activities were central in the development of trust through interreligious relations.

So far, so easy. The question of how such interreligious encounters can be developed and strengthened is much more complex. On the one hand, the research results often showed that religious themes had no prominence or had even been avoided. As Julia Ipgrave, project leader of ReDi in London, emphasises:

> As the case studies have shown, desire for community harmony can lead in some cases to a nervous avoidance of religious reference because of its perceived divisive power, but also leads to the promotion of interreligious activity as a way of combatting the negative potential of religious difference by building positive relations across religious divides. (Ipgrave 2019c:264).

Good neighbourliness often seemed more important than talking about religious ideas (Ipgrave 2019d:259). So here dialogical practice does not mean "theological" interreligious dialogue but rather interreligious "social" relations (Leirvik 2014).

This is one side of the coin. The other shows that religion can also serve as a strong impetus for common engagement. Our research findings show that this does not necessarily mean pressure to develop a common understanding of religion, nor to focus on commonalities only. It seems so that respecting difference is at least of equal importance. As one Christian interfaith worker put it: "Inter-faith isn't a religion, it's a way of bringing people together -- if we must believe all religions are the same to be involved, it's not going to work." (Ipgrave 2019b:183).

Nevertheless, another result of our case studies indicates that religious thinking with reference to theology can still be important in view of motivating people to enter into dialogue in spite of different religious backgrounds, as well as to legitimise interaction with the religious other (Ipgrave 2019b:192).

What we see is an ambivalence in the empirical analyses. The concept of good neighbourliness seems to be a priority which underlies common action aimed at building trust. For the sake of good neighbourliness, it sometimes seems advisable to avoid talking about religious themes and differences. Social interreligious relations often seem to be more important than theological interreligious dialogue. But at the same time, religious thinking also plays a role and can be a theme which people want to discuss, and which sometimes cannot be avoided. Here the background of a Dialogical Theology is relevant, as it represents a theological approach that accepts, legitimises, and even demands dialogue between people of different faiths and world views. As we emphasised above, Dialogical Theology encourages an acceptance of others with their religious views; it demands hospitality, strives for common social responsibility, and rejects essentialising one's own (religious) opinion.

So here we already see connections between our empirical findings of Dialogical Practice and Dialogical Theology. How can these connections be conceptualised and properly understood? We will return to these questions in our conclusion.

Heschel and Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi and Abraham Joshua Heschel are eminently religious dialogical thinkers. Both spiritual icons developed a Dialogical Theology that was rooted in their extraordinary religious worldviews (Meir 2021b). For Heschel, the diversity of religions was divinely willed. In Gandhi's ashram, prayers from different traditions were an integral part of the routine. Whereas Heschel focused mainly on Jewish-Christian relations, Gandhi concentrated on the Hindu-Muslim relationship, in view of the necessity that they cooperate in India.

Heschel's thoughts on depth theology come close to Gandhi's thoughts on "religion underlying all religions" (Gandhi 2009:41). Just as Heschel's depth theology united people, Gandhi's belief in the divine presence in every person made it possible to attend more to what unites than to what separates. The "religion underlying all religions" was the pursuit of Truth; such Truth was present in all religions, transcended them, and allowed believers to see the equality of all people. Religious truths were relative: they were seen as different sides of the Truth. For Gandhi, the Truth is God; it lies in the practice and social action that made the manifestation of Brahman in

everybody and everything visible. For Heschel, God's Name was at stake in the struggle for realising all people's equality. He perceived God as present in every human being, especially in the faces of the downtrodden and outcast. In his Yiddish poems, Heschel identified with God's concern for suffering people. For him, all people have sparks of the divine, all are rooted in God, and therefore all are interconnected.

In a way, Heschel's multiple social and political activities throughout the sixties until his death in 1972 continued Gandhi's liberating work for the Indian community in South Africa, and later for the decolonisation and spiritual independence in India.

For both Gandhi and Heschel, prayer and activism went hand in hand. Their religiosity was intimately linked to justice, compassion and reconciliation. Heschel's religious inwardness expressed itself in reverence for humans, who were in the image of the Divine. In Heschel's theology of pathos, the prophets were spiritual radicals who identified with God's care for humankind. The human being was "a disclosure of the divine, and all men are one in God's care for man" (Heschel 1966:7–8).

Whereas Gandhi pleaded the cause of the Indian community during his twenty-one year stay in South Africa, Heschel supported equal opportunities for black people in the United States and defended the rights of three million Jews in the former Soviet Union. They fasted and prayed as tactics of spiritual opposition. Heschel opposed the American engagement in the war in Vietnam. In a more radical way, Gandhi disapproved of war as such. Gandhi served God by caring for the poor and the afflicted. He loved the *Dalit*, calling them *Harijans*, children of God. Similar to Gandhi, Heschel heeded a prophetic call and became actively involved in social and political actions. He inspired Martin Luther King's vision, embodied in his speech "I have a Dream". In his own famous lecture "Religion and Race", in Chicago in 1963, he stated: "The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a black person to cross certain university campuses" (Heschel 1967:85). All groups had to be liberated. Racial prejudice was "*an eye disease, a cancer of the soul*" (Heschel 1967:87). Gandhi spoke about the "deep disease of colour prejudice" (Majmudar 2005:98). Marching at the side of King from Selma to Alabama, Heschel felt his legs were praying. He wrote to King that the day of the march was "a day of sanctification". Gandhi too marched for justice during his famous Salt March, in defiance of British imperialism. Heschel had most likely heard about Gandhi's *satyagraha* through his friends Martin Luther King and Thomas Merton, who admired Gandhi. King, Heschel and Gandhi loved to march for the cause of the disadvantaged and in support of civil rights. Their marches were a religious act, a non-violent testimony to the presence of God in all human beings. They knew that God was not to be found in temples but rather in the face of the oppressed, whose suffering had to be alleviated. Religion had to be brought into contact with economic, social and political life. It pervaded the entire sphere of existence.

The most striking affinity between Gandhi and Heschel lies in the conception and realisation of a non-violent liberation theology, in which God is present in all his creatures. With his active non-violence, Gandhi wanted to disclose Brahman in all living things. Parallel to Gandhi, Heschel developed a theocentric view, in which the human was considered to be "something transcendent in disguise" (Heschel 1951:47). Whereas Gandhi disclosed Brahman in all human beings, even the evil ones, Heschel in his neo-Hasidic view looked for the divine "sparks" in all souls. He stated that

"(f)rom the point of view of religious philosophy it is our duty to have regard and compassion for every man regardless of his moral merit. God's covenant is with all men, and we must never be oblivious of *the equality of the divine dignity* of all men. The image of God is in the criminal as well as in the saint" (Heschel 1967:95).

In Gandhi's view, one had to put effort into becoming conscious that creation was nothing less than Brahman's self-multiplication. The unity of mankind unveiled the oneness of God: "I believe in absolute oneness of God and therefore also of humanity. What though we have many bodies? We have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source" (CWMG 25:199).

Much like Gandhi, Heschel suffered with the sufferers. Gandhi's favourite hymn "The true Vaishnava" begins with the words, "He is a real Vaishnava, who feels the suffering of others as his own suffering" (Chatterjee 1983:27). He saw his God Rama "face to face in the starving millions of India" (Chatterjee 1983:17). Meeting poor peasants and living with untouchables, he felt as if he were face to face with God. Similarly, in his Yiddish poem *Ikh und Du*, Heschel recognised God and himself in the bodies of millions "as if under millions of masks my face would lie hidden" (Even-Chen and Meir 2012:16–17). Gandhi's empathy for the poor and the maltreated runs parallel to that of the Jewish prophets, who – according to Heschel – identified with the divine pathos. Heschel and Gandhi were modern prophets, who cared for the humiliated and protested against white privilege and white supremacy.

In their liberation theology, they developed a non-violent, dialogical hermeneutic of their foundational religious sources. Just as the Gita was for Gandhi the book *par excellence*, the Hebrew Bible was for Heschel the most holy book. As is well known, the Bible and the Gita have been used to support violent purposes. Many times people have read the Bible in the function of defending white supremacy and the privileges of whiteness. In the United States, one turned to the Bible to justify slavery. In South Africa, Afrikaners saw themselves as specially elected, as chosen people who read the Bible in a racist way. Gandhi emphasised non-violence in biblical literature and interpreted the Gita as describing the inner battles of the human being. He found that racism and religion exclude each other. In their struggle for human rights, Gandhi and Heschel used religious texts that linked religiosity, spirituality and politics. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909) was not merely presented as political independence; it was an elevated spiritual reality.

Gandhi and Heschel wanted to transform the human being. It was not enough to analyse; they felt people should act and change reality. For Gandhi, *satyagraha* was a love-force, based on *ahimsa* (non-violence) as a process and on *satya* (Truth) that has to be realised. It aimed to change people by not perpetuating the circle of violence. Through *satyagraha* Gandhi wanted to melt the heart of opponents. In the end, Truth would overcome evil. Gandhi actively protested against the colonial policy of the British vis-à-vis Hindus. In the same vein, Heschel protested against state violence in the case of the Vietnam war.

Zionism and *swaraj* were beyond mere nationalisms. Heschel saw Israel as a refuge for persecuted Jews all over the world, but he looked to Israel also with prophetic eyes. He celebrated the rebirth of Israel and also felt pain over the suffering and bitterness in the Middle East: "The Arabs and the Israelis must be brought into mutual dependence

by the supply of each other's wants. There is no other way of counteracting the antagonism" (Heschel 1974:182–183).

Both Gandhi and Heschel had a firm and enduring belief in communication and dialogue. The two towering spiritual men were convinced that their respective traditions were an enormous contribution to the betterment of humankind. Their liberation theology criticised mere nationalism that comes without inner transformation of the human being. For Gandhi, *swaraj* was never merely political; before anything else it was an ethical program. Similarly, in Heschel's view, Israel's task lay in the creation of a just society.

Heschel's and Gandhi's remarkable religiosity expressed itself in non-cooperation and in the moral battle against human suffering and humiliation. They strived for the liberation of all living beings. Heschel never met Gandhi, but their thoughts and actions were correlative. If a meeting between these two giants of the spirit had taken place, they would have had much to say to each other as two profoundly religious persons who inserted a humanistic religiosity into economic, social and political life.

Summary and Perspectives

Academic theology analyses the original impulses and texts of the past and tries to translate them into the present. This is a huge task, for which the reasoning and practices of both Gandhi and Heschel give helpful pointers. Relevant theology knows about multiple voices, the tensions, the fragmentation, and the unsolved questions of the beginnings as well as of the limits that contemporary interpretations have, even in the realm of one's "own" religion. Dialogical Theology is aware of these limits. It does not see its only or main task as that of developing theology in the confinement of one's own tradition; rather, it deems it necessary to engage in a deep dialogue with other theologies. As a structural consequence, a pluralisation of theology at universities seems to be a necessity, and we already see developments of such a pluralisation at universities worldwide (Weisse et al. 2020). Dialogical Theology refers to one's own as well as to the theologies of other religions – it is shaped by "trans-difference". This is both an extremely difficult task and a promise to reach more profound theological reasoning for our pluralised world. In addition, Dialogical Theology intends to relate to lived religion, although it is also shaped as normative in the best sense of the word. To achieve this, personal observations, "anecdotal" stories, as we see them in many theological reasonings, are insufficient. Instead, we ought to relate to reality in an academically profound and coherent way. Here, what we call "Dialogical Practice" comes in. It offers a possibility that goes far beyond local personal insight. Here, the regional context plays a greater role: the ambivalences, tensions, and even contradictions in how people are thinking and acting are analysed, so that real life and lived religion become visible in all their complexity. The more descriptive approach of Dialogical Practice, especially by means of qualitative methods of the social sciences, provides possibilities to acknowledge different motivations for entering into an interreligious dialogue or to avoid it: in order to get to know each other better, to build trust among neighbours, and to engage in concrete community projects. Dialogical Practice takes into consideration that religious thinking is constructed and diversified in relation to other – not only religious – diversities. It opens up the awareness that religion is embedded in complex social and political contexts. Dialogical Practice

provides reference points for a Dialogical Theology with all its high aims. While the aims must remain high, the differentiation we find in the practical field shows even more clearly the claims this theological approach has to deal with. The reverse is also necessary. Dialogical Theology serves, as we have seen, as a motivation and justification, even as a legitimisation of interreligious activities. It also becomes the source of reflection and discussion about religion. Dialogical Theology can provide vital support for people who are uncertain about whether their religion allows them to cooperate with and build trust, perhaps even friendship, with neighbours from different religious roots and convictions. Indeed, Dialogical Theology could be helpful for those who might fear the weakening of their own religious position or worldview if they interact and enter into dialogue with the religious other. So the two approaches are complementary: Dialogical Theology must refer to the complexity of what we call Dialogical Practice in order not to be restricted to normativity or to rely on personal experiences only. In contrast, Dialogical Practice needs the reference to Dialogical Theology in order to provide more than mappings of different positions, analyses of streams of thinking, contradiction, and tensions within and between religious and secular groups.

Theology has often understood itself as a thought leader and a referee in religious questions. Maybe academic theology has some potential to fulfil this role. But its limitations also become obvious in a time when transformation in all spheres of life, including religion, shows the deficits of such an understanding, and when other actors than those in academia show considerable approaches of religious thinking, of theological reasoning (Knitter 2020). Dialogical Theology, with its understanding of trans-difference, provides the background and backing for recognition of the religious and cultural other irrespective of, and even acknowledging, existing differences. Dialogical Practice shows the differentiated field of religious thinking, of common action, of developing good neighbourliness with all its difficulties, backlashes, and promises. Both approaches – that of Dialogical Theology and Dialogical Praxis – are necessary; they can strengthen but cannot replace each other. Even if they cannot be linked easily, interrelating the two – at least as far as possible – seems to be important to hold together two poles: the vision and the realities of interreligious dialogue.

We will indeed have to be aware that there are limits to interreligious dialogue. Several attitudes can make dialogue impossible. One of them is a violent reading of sacred Scriptures and the lack of proper contextualisation of them. Another impediment lies in exclusivist absolute truth claims in the approach to religious others. One might live in the illusion that the entire truth is on one's side, which makes listening to the other's religious narrative virtually impossible. With their dialogical theologies, Heschel and Gandhi offered a healing alternative. The dialogical philosophers Buber and Levinas approached religiosity with an ethical mindset. They offered criticism of and an alternative to religious fanaticism. Buber conceived religiosity as relatedness. Religion could lead away from God but could also lead to God. Buber's approach to religion as relative in comparison to religiosity permits the dialogical theologian to be critical towards those forms of religion that want God as an object, an "it", instead of living the rhythm of life in "the alternation of actuality and latency" (Buber 1970:162). In his ethical metaphysics, Levinas defined religion in a somewhat abstract manner as "the bond that is established between the same and the

other without constituting a totality" (Levinas 1969:40). With such a philosophical definition it becomes possible to criticise religions that neglect intersubjective relationships.

To sum up, religions have a Janus face, they carry an enormous energy that may be used for good and for bad goals. A remedy for various forms of violence lies in the development of a dialogical hermeneutic, apophatic thoughts, and a "trans-different" approach to interreligious encounters, which brings together diversity and unity, singularity and bridging. As the American-based artist Anna Törnquist knew well, all the colours in Joseph's multi-coloured coat are indispensable, but they receive their specificity only in their interaction in the entire composition.

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