

Violence and Christian Spirituality

An ecumenical conversation

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Interreligious Discourse : Hermeneutics and Fundamentalism

RICHARD KEARNEY

I come from a country – Ireland – where people have been killing each other for centuries in the name of God. Who possesses absolute truth? The Catholic King James or Protestant King Billy (fighting over accession to the Crown in the seventeenth century)? The Catholic IRA or Protestant UVF, pursuing their respective terrorist campaigns over the last 30 years, only reaching a cessation of hostilities with the Belfast Good Friday Agreement in 1998? And there are, alas, still so-called “peace lines” separating Catholic from Protestant communities in parts of Belfast as I speak. There are other places in the world too, of course, where interreligious wars have raged with even greater zeal and ferocity: Jerusalem, Kashmir, the Lebanon, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Bosnia.

Several years ago I emigrated with my family to the US to take up a Chair of Philosophy at Boston College. Here I presumed I would find a modern secular republic free of religious intolerance and belligerence. But scarcely had I arrived on American soil than Al Qaeda waged a war against the Evil Empire of the Great Satan, the USA; and this, in turn, provoked a “war on terror” of apocalyptic proportions. We heard such phrases as “crusade” and “campaign infinite justice” being invoked against an enemy identified as a quasi-demonic agent in a global “axis of evil”. Indeed, as late as October 2003, we find Lieutenant General William G. Boykin, a high-ranking Pentagon official, declaring: “I knew that my God was bigger than his” (i.e. Bin Laden’s Muslim God). “I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol.” I do not believe, alas, that these wars of terror are about to end soon. Armageddon scenarios of absolute Good versus absolute Evil seem set to continue well into the third millennium.

So what is to be done? Is religion inevitably and invariably a force for fundamentalism, intolerance and division? Are the very notions of spiritual purity and absolutism not condemned to sacrificial dramas of Us versus Them, the Elect versus the Damned, Angels versus Demons? I do not think so. In fact, it will be my wager here that a certain kind of religious hermeneutics can help lead us in the opposite direction, out of war towards peace and justice. To support this claim I will sketch some steps towards a hermeneutics of religious toleration, including narrative wisdom, exchange of readings and pardon.

The common phrase “Wisdom Traditions” applies to most of the world’s great religions. It refers to the widely held view that certain profound spiritual teachings and practices can guide us to tolerance, that is, to a more peaceful, compassionate and just life beyond the violence and rivalry of power politics. The pioneering Benedictine monk Bede Griffith, writes about this parallellism (but not syncretism) of wisdom traditions in his Christian commentary on the Bhagavad Gita entitled *River of Compassion*. Referring specifically to the “holy history of India”, where he spent most of his life as spiritual director of an Ashram, Griffiths comments: “It is really remarkable how one can see this new understanding, this conception of a personal God coming to light a little before the time of Christ. I think that it is a movement that took place in many parts of the world, not simply in Israel. There was an advance both in Buddhism with its idea of the *bodhisattva* and in Hinduism with the idea of a personal God as the embodiment of love and compassion, these developments taking place at about the same time. We realize that God is revealing himself in many ways, not only to Israel but to India, to China, and to (so-called) primitive people also.”¹

In more practical terms, this spiritual wisdom translates into a certain “middle way” of prudent judgement, discriminating discernment and right action. Citing the example of yoga, Griffiths writes: “Yoga is a real guide to life. There is always this middle way. Aristotle speaks of virtue as the mean between the extremes, and the Buddha teaches the Middle Way. St Benedict’s Rule is precisely the middle way for the monk, rather than the extreme of either indulgence or asceticism. The integrated man (*yukta*) is the one who knows the point of equilibrium between extremes. He it is who is always *sama*, he always remains the same between the pairs of opposites.”² When it comes to the primary qualities that lead to wisdom, Griffiths points out that these are largely universal and can be found alike in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and so on. In the Vedantic tradition, as presented in Chapter 13 of the Gita, these include the virtues of non-fearful non-violence (*ahimsa*) issuing in the ultimate goods of forgiving toleration (*kshanti*), so central to the life of the wise person (*sannyasi*). Griffiths explains: “Harmlessness (*ahimsa*) is the virtue which Gandhi made the basis of his life and philosophy, but it is fundamental also for a *sannyasi*. It is said that a *sannyasi* is not afraid of anyone and no one is afraid of him. It is not simply negative in the sense of ‘not killing’, but it is a whole attitude of mind involving freedom from aggression. Then there is *kshanti* – ‘forgiveness’, ‘forebearance’ or ‘tolerance’. This is central to St Paul’s list of virtues in the letter to the Colossians, with which this whole passage can be compared (Col. 3:1, 13).”

It is not really surprising to find such suggestive intersections between the different wisdom traditions, given the insights of so many of the great spiritual mystics that God is ultimately one even as the ways to God are many. The earliest Vedic scripture, *Rigveda*, suggests as much when it

states “to what is One, sages give many names” (1.164.46). And one finds similar convictions being expressed within the Christian tradition, for example, as when St Martin observes that “all mystics speak the same language since they all come from the same country”.³ However, this language is, as we shall see, a profoundly poetical and multivalent one – so deeply resistant to the triumphalist dogma of fundamentalism.

In the biblical tradition, this wisdom revelation is most powerfully manifest, in my view, in the three books of Solomon the wise ruler, namely, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. What is striking about these books is how they manage to convey the heritage of wisdom through particular narratives and metaphors. This mode of wisdom is deeply figurative, communicating in multi-layered “figures of speech”. Indeed, the third and final book of Solomon’s wisdom, the Song of Songs, is so richly symbolic in meaning as a marriage-drama of bride and bridegroom that it has provoked the hermeneutic imagination of many great thinkers. These include early Church Fathers like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, medieval commentators in both the Christian and Jewish traditions, celebrated mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux, Theresa of Lisieux and John of the Cross and, more recently, such contemporary philosophers as Paul Ricoeur, André LaCoque and Julia Kristeva. The polysemantic resources of the Canticles are hermeneutically inexhaustible. Or as John of the Cross put it in his Prologue to *The Spiritual Canticle*, speaking of the “divine Song of Solomon” which he was revisiting: “the Holy Spirit, unable to express the fullness of his meaning in ordinary words, utters mysteries in strange figures and likenesses. The saintly doctors, no matter how much they have said or will say, can never furnish an exhaustive explanation of these figures and comparisons, since the abundant meanings of the Holy Spirit cannot be caught in words. Thus the explanation of these expressions usually contains less than what they embody in themselves.”⁴

This is a wisdom that does not translate into *theoria*, the abstract propositions of purely scientific and mathematical knowledge. It calls rather for a special exercise of practical wisdom, what Aristotle called *phronesis*, capable of articulating a more provisional, tentative, approximate mode of understanding, open to multiple interpretations and applications (which does not mean limitless relativism, as some like to imply). Above all, this mode of phronetic understanding is capable of negotiating a medial position between the claims of universality and particularity, thereby conjoining the all-inclusive claims of timeless *sophia* with the more specific and singular claims of temporal faith traditions – biblical, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.; and each of these wisdom traditions, in turn, possesses its own special historicity of production, transmission, translation and reception.

Whether the nuptial poetics of the Song of Songs are really about the relation between Israel and Yahweh, the Soul and Christ, the Church and the Father, or simply a lovesick fiancée and her long-awaited lover, is a matter of interpretation. And because these, and several other meanings,

are not just allowed but actually solicited by the latent pluralist potencies of this wisdom text, we find here a powerful example of hermeneutic tolerance. As the Talmudic rabbis liked to remind us, each line of this wisdom story calls for at least ten different readings! Moreover, the fact that the books of Solomonic wisdom are (as Origen notes) committed to a particular blending of the moral and the aesthetic, again confirms their proximity to the Greek notion of *phronesis* which comprises these same dual functions. The advantage of this double duty of ethics-poetics is that religious wisdom is not allowed to become either too moralistic (ethics without poetics) or too arbitrary (poetics without ethics). The proper balance between these two wisdom functions promises, I submit, a reliable recipe of toleration – religious or otherwise.

But the poetics of the Song of Solomon also call for an ethic of generosity to the extent that it portrays a deity who is vulnerable, that is, dependent on humanity for love. This theo-erotic drama between human and divine lovers reveals a God who needs humans, who calls out to his finite lovers to be made flesh, incarnate, embodied. Far from the power politics of omnipotence, the Solomonic bringer of wisdom is, to use Joyce's expression, a "bringer of pluralities", a harbinger of infinite reference, allusion and association. This is the God who *may be in the flesh of history* only if we say yes to the call of love and justice. A God of little things, of the least of these, of mustard seeds and yearnings and longings of the heart. A God desperate to desire and be desired, to love and be loved, to transfigure and be transfigured, to say and be said in many different ways to many different people. A God of infinite tolerance far removed from the totalizing metaphysics of omnipotence and omniscience.⁵

The hermeneutic tolerance of polysemy was not confined to rabbinical and talmudic traditions. Within Christian traditions too we find a radical commitment to the Middle Way (of what I call "diacritical interpretation", that is, discernment of signs between opposite extremes).⁶ Jesus did indeed claim, true to his monotheistic heritage, that he was the "way, the truth and the life". But he never claimed to be the *only* way, the *only* truth and the *only* life. Indeed, had Jesus done so he would, in my view, have disqualified himself from his avowed role as Lord of all-embracing love. One *only* has to recall such narrative scenes as the exchange with the Samaritan woman at the well, or the healing of the sick on the Sabbath, or the writing in the sand during the trial of the woman taken in adultery, to appreciate what an extraordinary master of hermeneutic tolerance – and ethical toleration – Jesus was. We sometimes forget that Jesus took great care never to write anything, except for those words in the sand that nobody read but that resisted murder. And when some of his words were eventually committed to writing, the Spirit that likes to blow where it will, made sure there were a healthy plurality of scribes and witnesses (four at the very least). Jesus' word was revealed by love rather than dogma – as is dramatically illustrated in his sharing of bread with the disciples at Emmaus before "their

eyes were opened and they recognized him". Only after love do they receive *retrospectively* the wisdom he revealed to them "when he opened the Scriptures" to them on the road from Jerusalem (Luke 24). In other words, the wisdom attested to by Christ, as by the Jewish prophets before him, was one of embodied action which subsequently called out for an endless hermeneutics of tolerant and pluralist interpretation.

The followers Peter and Paul also testified to the tolerant wisdom of the Middle Way in the famous compromise of the Jerusalem Conference. This was a crucial meeting of opposed minds, a negotiated settlement between those who wanted to keep Christianity as a local movement within Judaism (James and Peter) and those who wanted to break all such historical ties and open up a purely spiritual universalism (Paul and the Gentiles). The conference was a historic *combinatio oppositorum* which set the tone for an open and flexible tradition within Judeo-Christian monotheism, a way of acknowledging that if God is indeed One there are many different paths leading to this Oneness. In his recent book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Alain Badiou sums up the importance of the Jerusalem accord: "By allowing Paul's (universalist) action to develop at the same time as that of Judeo-Christians of strict observance, the Jerusalem conference ultimately prevents Christianity from becoming a Jewish sect, another precarious scission (in the wake of many others). But in curbing the zeal of those Gentile-Christians hostile to Judaism, and perhaps that of Paul himself, it prevented Christianity from being merely a new illuminism, one just as precarious because devoid of all basis in historical Judaism. The Jerusalem conference is genuinely foundational, because it endows Christianity with a twofold principle of opening and historicity. It thereby holds tight to the thread of the event (Christ's incarnation and resurrection) as initiation of a truth procedure. That the event is new should never let us forget that it is such only with respect to a determinate situation, wherein it mobilizes the elements of its site."⁷

If something analogous to this hermeneutic tolerance practised by Paul and Peter two thousand years ago were to be applied to the opposition between Palestinians and Israelis in today's Jerusalem, it is possible to imagine the seemingly endless hostilities coming to an end. For the Jerusalem formula allows one to remain faithful to one's particular identity while expressing equal fidelity to a common vision of love and justice. (Something which should not be so inconceivable for Muslims and Jews – or Catholics and Protestants – in any case, since they *all* claim allegiance to the same monotheistic deity.)

To assist in this task of hermeneutic tolerance, another crucial function of *phronetic* wisdom might be called into play here – that of exchanging readings with other traditions.⁸ The more Muslims, Jews and Christians (to speak only of the monotheistic tradition) can learn to retell and renarrate their own versions of sacred history to others and, by extension, exchange them with their rivals or opponents, the more likely it is for them to dis-

cover that they each have a history of suffering and persecution, of bondage and exodus, of death and rebirth – and that in many instances they actually share the same founding Abrahamic narratives of commemoration. Thomas Mann made a powerful point about this exchange of wisdom memories in his rewriting of the Exodus stories in *Joseph and his Brothers*, a novel written in the middle of the Second World War. His aim was to remind his fellow Germans that the Nazi hatred of Jews was a total betrayal of the narrative wisdom traditions commonly shared by Christianity and Judaism. And this argument has been reiterated in different ways by other advocates of narrative tolerance, such as Hannah Arendt, Franz Rosenzweig and Paul Ricoeur.

What is true of interreligious dialogue between the Abrahamic faiths is equally and perhaps even more the case when we come to interreligious exchanges with non-biblical traditions. I strongly believe that the voice of the “stranger” adds hugely to the reading of one’s own wisdom tradition. It is often “by indirection that we find direction out”. In other words, it is frequently by means of hermeneutic detours through foreign and unfamiliar perspectives that the wisdom of our own particular tradition is most powerfully revealed to us (and to others). I think of Bede Griffiths’ reading of the Bhagavad Gita, the Dalai Lama’s reading of the Gospels, Chirazi’s translation of St John’s Gospel, Tich Nhat Hahn’s reading of the Bible, Thomas Merton’s reading of Taoist and Buddhist scriptures, and so on. So often it is the voice that comes from the wilderness, from the outside, from a land and language alien to our own, which reveals us to ourselves – sometimes as the thinnest and smallest of voices – if only we have ears to hear its wisdom.

Let me conclude with some remarks on the hermeneutic of tolerance sketched out by my friend and mentor, Paul Ricoeur, who has recently passed away. Such a hermeneutic would provide, first, a basis for an *ethic of narrative hospitality* which involves “taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other”.⁹ In the cross-over of testimonies and memories between people of different religious traditions we might witness a salutary transference and translation permitting us to welcome the story of the other, the stranger, the victim, the forgotten one.

Second, such hermeneutic tolerance solicits an *ethic of narrative flexibility*. Religions constantly face the challenge of resisting the reification of a founding religious event (Creation, Incarnation, Revelation, Enlightenment, Theophany, Manifestation, Sermon, Martyrdom) into a fixed dogma by showing how each event may be told in different ways by different generations and by different narrators. Not that everything thereby becomes relative and arbitrary. On the contrary, acts of foundational religious suffering, for example, call out for tolerance and love, and the best way of achieving this is often to invite empathy with strangers and adversaries by allowing for a plurality of narrative perspectives. The resulting overlap

may thus lead to what Gadamer calls a “fusion of horizons” where diverse horizons of consciousness and conscience may at last find some common ground.¹⁰ A reciprocal transfer between opposite minds. “The identity of a group, culture, people or nation, is not that of an immutable substance”, writes Ricoeur, “nor that of a fixed structure, but that, rather, of a recounted story.” A hermeneutic exchange of stories effectively resists arrogant conceptions of religious cultural identity which prevent us from perceiving the radical implications of the principle of narrativity – namely, “the possibilities of revising every story which has been handed down and of carving out a place for several stories directed towards the same past”.¹¹ This mode of attentiveness to stories other than our own might be said to consort well with the virtue of detachment (the stage in yoga called *pratyahara*) vis-à-vis our own obsessive attachment to what is “mine” and “ours”.

This leads us to a third tolerance principle – that of *narrative plurality*. Pluralism here does not mean any lack of respect for the singularity of any particular religious event narrated through the various acts of remembering. It might even be said to increase our sense of awareness of such an event, especially if it is foreign to us in time, space or cultural provenance. “*Recounting differently* is not inimical to a certain historical reverence to the extent that the inexhaustible richness of the event is honoured by the diversity of stories which are made of it, and by the competition to which that diversity gives rise.”¹² Multiple perspectives need not betray the unique singularity of a confessional event; on the contrary, they may eloquently testify to its exfoliating richness and inexhaustible suggestiveness. And this faithful testimony may in fact be deepened as we extend the circle of reference to include further perspectives from other religious confessions. Ricoeur adds this critical point: “The ability to recount the founding events of our (religious) history in different ways is reinforced by the exchange of cultural memories. This ability to exchange has as a touchstone the will to share symbolically and respectfully in the commemoration of the founding events of other cultures, as well as those of their ethnic minorities and their minority religious denominations.”¹³ This point applies as much to events of pain and trauma as to events of grace and epiphany.

A fourth feature of hermeneutic tolerance is the *transfiguring of the past*. This involves a creative retrieval of the betrayed promises of history, so that we may respond to our “debt to the dead” and endeavour to give them a voice. The goal of tolerant testimonies is therefore to try to give a future to the past by remembering it in a more attentive way, ethically and poetically. A crucial aspect of reinterpreting traditions is the task of discerning past promises which have *not yet* been honoured. For “the past is not only what is bygone – that which has taken place and can no longer be changed – it also lives in the memory thanks to arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted.”¹⁴ In other words, the unfulfilled future of the past may well signal the richest dimension of a religious tradition; and the emancipation of “this unfulfilled future

of the past is the major benefit that we can expect from the crossing of memories and the exchange of narratives.”¹⁵ It is especially the founding events of a religious community – traumatic or revelatory – which require to be reread in this critical manner in order to unlock the potencies and expectancies which the subsequent unfolding of history may have forgotten or travestied. This is why hermeneutic tolerance involves a special acoustic, a particular practice of auditory imagination attuned to certain seminal moments of suffering or hope, and to the various complex testimonial and textual responses to those events, which are all too often occluded by Official History. “The past is a cemetery of promises which have not been kept”, notes Ricoeur. And attentive modes of remembrance may provide ways of “bringing them back to life like the dry bones in the valley described in the prophecy of Ezekiel”.¹⁶

A fifth and final moment in the hermeneutics of tolerance is *pardon*. If empathy and hospitality towards others are crucial steps in the ethics of remembrance, there is something *more* – something which entails moving beyond narrative imagination to forgiveness. In short, the exchange of memories of suffering demands more than sympathy and duty (though these are essential for any kind of justice). And this something “extra” involves pardon in so far as pardon means “shattering the debt”. Here, the order of justice and reciprocity can be supplemented, but not replaced, by that of the more explicitly religious order of “charity and gift”. Such spiritual forgiveness demands huge patience, an enduring practice of “working through”, mourning and letting go. But it is not a forgetful forgiveness. Amnesty can never be based on amnesia. It remembers our debt to the dead while at the same time introducing something other, something difficult almost to the point of impossibility, but something all the more important for that reason. One thinks of Brandt kneeling at Warsaw, Havel’s apology to the Sudeten Germans, Hume’s preparedness to speak with the IRA, Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem, Hillesum’s refusal to hate her hateful persecutors. All miraculous moments where an ethics of tolerance is touched by a poetics of pardon. But I repeat: the one does not replace the other – *both* justice *and* pardon are crucially important in the act of remembering past suffering. “To the degree that charity exceeds justice we must guard against substituting it for justice. Charity remains a surplus; this surplus of compassion and tenderness is capable of giving the exchange of memories its profound motivation, its daring and its momentum.”¹⁷

In the difficult act of pardon, religious tolerance must always remain attentive to the demands of moral and political justice. Pardon cannot forget protest any more than love can forget action.

NOTES

- ¹ Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, Continuum, New York, 1995, p.117.
- ² *Ibid.*, p.116.
- ³ See E. Underhill, *Mysticism*, New American Library, New York, 1974, p.80. See also Thomas Myladi, *St John of the Cross and the Bhagavad-Gita*, Cross Cultural Publications, Indiana, 2000, pp.81ff.; and Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda), *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*, ISPCK, Delhi, 1998. For one of the most illuminating and original presentations of the philosophical and methodological stakes involved in the interreligious dialogue between wisdom traditions, see Francis Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions*, Oxford University Press, 2000, in particular pp.20-8. I am especially indebted to Francis Clooney and John Makransky, colleagues of mine at Boston College, for introducing me to some of the key critical issues of “comparative theology”, particularly as it relates to the Christian-Hindu-Buddhist conversation; and to Peggy McLoughlin for helping to instruct me in the teachings and practice of the Patanjali Yoga tradition (though I remain a faltering novice in both).
- ⁴ St John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle in The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, ICS Publications, Washington, 1991, p.470.
- ⁵ For a most suggestive reading of the implications of such a non-omnipotent tolerant divinity for interreligious dialogue, see Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*, Knopf, New York, 1999, especially pp.134-41, 195-203. See, for example: “This God does not direct the universe, he underlies it. Or he ‘prolongs himself’ into it, in Teilhard’s terms... After all the semipotent God has one hand tied behind his back. (I cannot prove that with the other he wipes and stirs our souls from time to time, or that he spins like a fireball through our skulls, and knocks open our eyes so we see flaming skies and fall to the ground and say, ‘Abba! Father!’)” (p.140). Combining the teachings of Jewish mystics like Rabbi Luria and Christian mystics like Teilhard de Chardin, Dillard explores the theme that the world is God’s body and we are God’s hands. It is always man who is absent, she writes, not grace. See also our *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001.
- ⁶ See “Introduction” to our *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, Routledge, New York, 2003.
- ⁷ Alain Badiou, *St Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, Stanford, CA, 2003, p.25.
- ⁸ Paul Ricoeur, “Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe” in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. R. Kearney, Sage, London, 1996, pp.3-14.
- ⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe”, p.7
- ¹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1975.
- ¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, “Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe”, p.7
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.8.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p.9.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8. See also Ricoeur, “Memory and Forgetting” and “Imagination, Testimony and Trust” in *Questioning Ethics*, ed. Mark Dooley and Richard Kearney, Routledge, New York, 2004, pp.5-11, 12-17. For a more detailed treatment of these themes see Ricoeur, *Memory, History and Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004. See also on this subject of critical and empathic remembrance our “Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance” in *Questioning Ethics*, pp.18-32.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.8. See also Francis Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, pp.26-7 and Rita Gross and Terry Muck (eds.), *Buddhists Talk about Jesus, Christians Talk about the Buddha*, Continuum, New York, 2002.
- ¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe”, p.9.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11. For a more elaborate analysis of this point see Ricoeur, “Love and Justice” in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, pp.23-40