

Inter-religious or Trans-religious: Exploring the Term “Inter-religious” in a Feminist Postcolonial Perspective

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This paper will contribute to the discourse on terminology connected to interfaith and interreligious studies, dialogues, and relations. At a closer look, the prefix “inter” in “inter-religious” may be problematic if one critically views the activities or situations it intends to describe. Let me elaborate a bit further on this.

The prefix “inter-” usually indicates a relation between stable, equal entities, where the boundaries between them are more or less fixed. In organized inter-religious relations, however, it is significant to acknowledge that relations established in the encounter itself are always situated in a broader context. This context is not only the immediate social, political, and religious current circumstances and geographical location, but also includes specific historical aspects, and in may include transnational spatial contexts if some of the participants have roots and relations to other geopolitical locations. The space of the dialogue is always connected to other spaces because the people involved are in motion. The discourse, the conversation and the group process in the dialogue have marks of other discourses, conversations and relations. In a critical perspective, this observation entails that inter-religious dialogues are marked in different ways by internal and external hierarchies of power and authority connected to gender, culture, ethnicity and class.¹

In an inter-religious dialogue, the question of representation and the questions of who is to decide the topics, the aims and the premises are crucial. A premise of an inter-religious or inter-faith dialogue is that people from different *religious* backgrounds and affiliations are present. The question is: What about other human differences? From a feminist postcolonial perspective the questions of who is constructing the boundaries, and who is controlling inclusion and exclusion in the dialogues are connected to issues of representation and to the authority to interpret a religious tradition.

To replace “inter” with the term “trans” requires the acknowledgement of a larger fluidity in the encounter between people of different religious affiliation, and opens it up for addressing thematizing *intra-religious* differences. It may also make the relevant contextual power relations influencing the dialogue more visible. On the other hand, the term “trans” instead of “inter” may be understood as a challenge or a threat to religious boundaries the participants in the dialogue wish to keep stable in order to feel secured in their own religious identity. I will illustrate the difference between an inter-religious and a trans-religious dialogue through two models of dialogue I suggested when I framed the empirical material in my PhD-thesis “Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Reading” theoretically. The first model, “religious difference as constitutive,” suggests a dialogue where religious difference is evaluated as the constitutive and most significant aspect of the encounter. The second model: “religious differences as challenge,” is an attempt to figure a dialogue where religious differences are seen as challenge, where both the religious differences as such may be challenged, and other human differences explored. It should be stressed that the two models do not entirely correspond to the distinction between inter- and trans-religious dialogues, but they may be useful to illustrate the exploration of the terms “inter” and “trans” connected to dialogue. It should also be noted that the two models are porous rather than watertight, and that the same dialogue processes could include both ways of organizing inter-/trans-religious encounters.

¹ Nehring, A. “On the Communication of Sacred Texts,” in *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe. Between Texts and People*. D. Cheetham et al (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), 383.

In the first model, religious boundaries are seen to be fixed and the people involved are first and foremost representing an official interpretation of their religious belief, reflecting the fact that religious difference in itself is the premise for the dialogue. The aim of the dialogue is to increase mutual knowledge and decrease tensions between religious groups, and to create a shared platform to present the represented beliefs in a positive or constructive way towards society at large. Intra-religious differences are not in focus, and mutual criticism of each other's traditions is not encouraged. In some examples of this kind of dialogue, such as the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, there is an explicit aim to reduce the influence of secularism and increase the influence of religious traditions in broader society.² Other examples of dialogue after this model are broad, official or semi-official institutionally-anchored dialogues on national or international level. From a feminist postcolonial view, these types of dialogue may be criticized for confirming existing hierarchies regarding gender and sometimes cultural/ethnic background. Because intra-religious discussions are not addressed and the a priori view on religion is that it represents a constructive force in society, the embedded patriarchal and colonial structures in religious traditions may not be signified and challenged. Jeannine Hill Fletcher in her contribution to *Inter-religious dialogue: "Women in Inter-Religious Dialogue"* states that what she names the "Parliamentary Model of Dialogue"– referring to the function of the World's Parliament of Religions in a historical perspective– excludes women and women's issues because it is based on representatives from the religions who are authorities and leaders in their respective traditions, which means that they are mostly men. She states that from the beginning of the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 the initiative takers only had eyes for the "brotherhood" of religious traditions, unaccompanied by any focus on "sisterhood." Hill Fletcher also believes that the men who had the power of definition over the arrangement, the Western men, only had enough attention for one significant other, which would mean that this significant other shifted from being women in their own tradition to non-Western men from other traditions, and that Western women thus slipped out of their focus. Brotherhood was formed to include all in an androcentric construction of mainstream religion. Hill Fletcher's investigation of the Parliament's further development shows that women who attended the meetings started to form their own ways of dialoging, in what she calls the "Activist Model of Dialogue." She also suggests a "Storytelling model of dialogue" for everyday life.³ They are both based outside of any formal hierarchical representation in the religious communities, and thus more open for women. They give a different perspective on the notion of religion as more complex, entangled with social, cultural and political contexts.⁴

Both of Hill Fletcher's model suggestions can be related to what I suggested as the second model of inter-/trans-religious dialogue which views religious differences in a different manner than the former. Religious boundaries and religious traditions as such are not to be regarded as fixed, but rather flexible or fluid. Other human differences such as gender, ethnicity and social differences may then be recognized and thematized. To openly challenge religious differences creates space for more criticism of the traditions in the dialogue, including criticism of gendered power hierarchies and colonial discourses embedded in religious interpretations. The second model aims at a balance between mutual respect and agency for transformation. It could be criticized for focusing too much on the individual participant, at the risk of losing the connection to the mainstream discourses in the religious traditions. However, this model provides tools for accepting diversity within the traditions and for self-reflection that provides space for both respect and transformation, when functioning at its best. Paulo Freire's slogan for dialogue as "transforming and re-humanizing the world" fits this model well.⁵ The perspective of fluidity regarding culture and

2 Kepnes, S. "A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning" in D.F. Ford and C.C. Pecknold ed. *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 34.

3 Fletcher, J.H. "Women in Inter-Religious Dialogue". In Cornille, C. (Ed.). *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-religious dialogue*. (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 175, 177.

4 Ibid.

5 Freire, Paulo *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 89.

religion is also applied to the relation between the secular and the religious, which is not static but intertwined and fluid.

Agreement is not an aim for either of these two models of dialogue. But an unstable, plural place must emerge from the encounter to create a “third space” in dialogue, which may be a shared space from which one has a possibility to work for transformation. One may, for instance, imagine an encounter of this kind to establish a common criticism directed not only at society but also at the religious traditions themselves, including their canonical scriptures and their practices of representation.

This way of conceptualizing interreligious dialogue opens up the possibility for the dialogue not only to change the broader society but also to create new interpretations of the religious traditions themselves and possibly transform them. It would not promote religious values over secular, but rather discuss the relationship between the two. This model creates instability – or rather takes into consideration the instability existing in the field, and although the model it could be criticized to deconstruct religious boundaries and challenge religious traditions, it opens up such things as canonical scriptures and religious norms and practice for feminist and postcolonial criticism.⁶

One may say that there can never be too many spaces available for religious encounter or too many models for how these encounters should happen. I believe this is true. At the same time, critical investigation is necessary to provide tools of self-reflection. The two models can be seen as complementary: one could say that both are needed, and that together they provide spaces for religious people having various positions and aims. Representatives of the two models may challenge and criticize each other and thus develop discourses of criticism that are useful for all involved. But the models may also be seen as contradictory. If the hegemonic discourses within the religious traditions prefer the first model to the second, there may gradually be less space for

6 Grung, A. H. “Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings. Christian and Muslim Women in Norway Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran and the *Hadith*.” Ph.D. diss., the University of Oslo 2011, 63

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encounters aiming at transformation and self-criticism, which is bad news for feminists and other marginalized groups within the traditions.

Another possibility is that the encounters shaped by model two could gradually change the hegemonic discourses in the religious traditions, together with intra-religious discourses of change. This would be a long-term process and should probably not be relied on as the only way forward for those aiming at transformation of the religious traditions.

Inter-religious and trans-religious dialogue or relations may not be mutually exclusive descriptive terms, but rather addressing different forms of dialogue. It may also be a describe processes in an ongoing dialogue, that can move from inter- to trans- or the opposite. If used more normatively, the trans-religious perspective may describe dialogues that are more aware of intra-religious differences and questions of power in the dialogue. Introducing the term trans-religious is therefore useful for establishing a critical perspective in the current discourse.