

# Interreligious Studies: a Relational Approach to the Study of Religion

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The term “interreligious studies” is still a relatively new one in academia but during the last decade, some universities (like my own in Oslo) have established new chairs and study programs with exactly this title. Since 2005, there has also been a European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS), which holds biannual conferences and publishes the journal *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*. In 2013, AAR welcomed an Interreligious and Interfaith Studies Group under the double headings of “interreligious” and “interfaith”.

In my following reflections, I will mainly stick to the expression “interreligious” – in tune with the title of my book, *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*.<sup>2</sup>

In my book, I try to define interreligious studies as an academic discipline. Many associate interreligious studies primarily with theology and in the European context this particular term has mainly been used within faculties of theology. But interreligious studies also link up with important developments in the established field of religious studies.

Paul Hedges, in a recent entry in the *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religion*, locates interreligious studies at the “interface between a more traditionally secular Religious Studies discipline, and a more traditionally confessional theological discipline.” In comparison with religious studies, Hedges suggests, interreligious studies are ... “more expressly focused on the dynamic encounter and engagement between religious traditions and persons.”<sup>3</sup>

As implied by the prefix *inter*, there is something essentially *relational* about interreligious studies, making it different both from confessional theology and from religious studies in the conventional sense. It nevertheless links up with interesting developments in religious studies, as exemplified by Gavin Flood in a chapter on “Dialogue and the situated observer” in his book *Beyond Phenomenology* (1999). Referring to the shift to language in religious and cultural studies, Flood criticizes the idea of “the detached, epistemic subject penetrating the alien world of the other through the phenomenological process.” Instead, Flood writes, “the subject must be defined in relation to other subjects.” Flood goes as far as to say that religious studies thus become “a dialogical enterprise in which the inquirer is situated within a particular context or narrative tradition, and whose research into narrative traditions, that become the objects of investigation, must be apprehended in a much richer and multi-faceted way.”<sup>4</sup>

Trying to further define interreligious studies, I find Flood’s Bakhtin-inspired idea of the researcher being thrown into a dialogical relationship with people or texts of the object tradition highly relevant. Linking up with Flood, I would suggest that interreligious studies are *dialogical* and *relational* in three different senses:

- (1) The *object* of study is interreligious relations in the broadest sense, including, I suggest, the relation between religion and non-religion. Rather than researching

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<sup>2</sup> Leirvik, Oddbjørn. *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Hedges, Paul. “Interreligious Studies,” in A. Runehov and L. Oviedo ed. *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religion* (New York: Springer, 2013), 1077.

<sup>4</sup> Flood, Gavin. *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999), 143.

one particular tradition, interreligious studies investigate the dynamic encounter between religious (and non-religious) traditions and the space that opens or closes between them. I would like to emphasize here that the object of interreligious studies is not interfaith dialogue alone. The object of study may equally be confrontational and othering discourses between the religions, and within them.

- (2) With regard to the *subject* (the researcher) I would contend that interreligious studies are by nature *interdisciplinary*. Religion being a multidimensional phenomenon, the complexity of interreligious relations can only be grasped by a combination of cultural analytical, social science-, legal, religious studies- and theological approaches. I suggest that in all these disciplines, and particularly in theology, the exploration of interreligious relations should also be *interactive* in Flood's dialogical sense.
- (3) As for *the research process* and its institutional frameworks, I would suggest that interreligious studies in the theological sense can only be meaningfully done by subjects engaged *in conversation between* different faith traditions, in an effort at interfaith (i.e. relational) theology. In the context of theological faculties in Europe, the introduction of interreligious studies parallels an effort to become multireligious faculties in which, for instance, Islamic theology is taught alongside Christian theology – and in dialogue between the two.

Elaborating a bit on the researcher's self-understanding, interreligious studies should be carried out with the openness to reflect critically on *one's own position* in the spaces between different traditions. When studying a separate religion, it has been commonplace in religious studies to claim that you need not – or should not – be implicated yourself in the object of study. As we have seen, this idea has been fundamentally challenged by Gavin Flood's more interactive approach to religious studies. But in the case of interreligious studies, it is hard to see how anyone could say that he or she is not a part of the studied field – especially if we include those complex spaces between religion and secularity that in my understanding are a constitutive part of interreligious studies. Who is not part of the spaces between religions, cultures and secularities? Who is not already a positioned agent in those spaces, when undertaking a particular study?

With a view to the many tensions between the religions, and not least between religion and non-religion, interreligious studies thus become studies of conflicts that you are already part of.

With regard to agency, there is also the question of interfaith education versus critical outsider perspectives on what dialogue activists are doing. In an article from 1998 by Scott Daniel Dunbar, titled "The place of interreligious dialogue in the academic study of religion" he argues that "interfaith studies" in academia should be both experiential and prescriptive, not just descriptive. Emphasizing the agency perspective, and on a normative note, Dunbar's overarching aim seems to be the education of interfaith activists:

Descriptive study is useful because it records and documents the dialogue process for the present and future generations. Prescriptive study introduces students to more thought-provoking questions, such as: Can interreligious dialogue play a role in resolving religious conflicts and healing past injustices? ... Finally, experiential study helps students study to understand the dynamics of interreligious dialogue in a more existential way that has practical implications for their own lives.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dunbar, Scott Daniel "The place of interreligious dialogue in the academic study of religion," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35:3-4 (1998), 462.

However, as David Cheetham has emphasized in an article about “The University and Interfaith Education”, interfaith education needs the critical outsider perspective of religious studies in order not to be controlled by dialogue insiders who are well aware of their role as agents but perhaps not always able to see themselves from a critical distance.<sup>6</sup>

Moving now from the agency aspect to the *interdisciplinary* nature of interreligious studies, in the latter part of my presentation I will briefly indicate three different theoretical perspectives on the “space between”, a metaphor borrowed from Martin Buber and used rather extensively in my own writings. Although the notion “space between” refers mostly to how interfaith dialogue can be conceptualized, it may also contain power-critical perspectives.

- (1) Martin Buber’s *philosophical* notion of “the realm of between” links up with his basic understanding of an I/Thou relation in which both parties resist the temptation of reducing the other to an object, an “It:” “Spirit is not in the I, but between I and Thou ... Man lives in the spirit, if he is able to respond to his Thou ...”<sup>7</sup> In a later book from 1947 titled *Between Man and Man*, he writes: “On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of ‘between.’”<sup>8</sup> Buber’s rather idealistic understanding of the dialogical space has been challenged by Emmanuel Levinas in his critical insistence of the asymmetrical nature of any human relation: “There would be an inequality, a dissymmetry, in the Relation, contrary to the ‘reciprocity’ upon which Buber insists, no doubt in error.”<sup>9</sup>
- (2) Levinas’ more power-sensitive perception of interpersonal relations may be further elucidated from a *social science* or *cultural analysis* perspective, for example as developed by Edvard Soja and Homi Bhabha in their use of the notion “Third Space”. In Bhabha, the notion of Third Space offers a communicative perspective on how the production of cultural meaning always transcends the utterances of the I and the You: “The meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the other.” And he goes on: “It is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture ... by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (Bhabha 2004: 56). Notwithstanding this optimistic note, Bhabha is persistent in his reminder that Third Space – as an in-between space – is always contested space, which can be blocked by rival claims to cultural hegemony.
- (3) *Theologically*, many examples could of course be cited of recent efforts at doing “interreligious theology” in the spaces between religious traditions. Let me on this occasion draw your attention to the Shi’ite Muslim scholar Hasan Askari who in an article from 1972 titled “The dialogical relationship between Christianity and Islam” went as far as to suggest that the two religions, by their rival understandings of the Word of God “constitute one complex of faith”, one starting with the Person, and another with Scripture. According to Askari, “[t]heir separateness does not denote two areas of conflicting truths, but a dialogical necessity.”<sup>10</sup> Seeing Christianity and Islam as “a dialogical whole,” Askari envisages Christians and Muslims trying to interpret the signs of God together, not with the ambition of reaching harmony but rather in an attempt to come to terms with irreducible

6 Cheetham, David. “The University and Interfaith Education,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15:1 (2005), 16–35.

7 Buber, Martin. *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 57f.

8 Buber, Martin. *Between Man and Man*. R. G. Smith trans. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 242f.

9 Levinas, Emmanuel. *Of God who Comes to Mind*. B. Bergo trans. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 150.

10 Askari, Hasan. “The dialogical relationship between Christianity and Islam” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9 (1972), 485.

differences: “A common religious sign must be differently apprehended. It is the very ambiguity, richness, of the religious sign that gives rise to different and even opposed interpretations and understandings” [in this case, of the Word of God]. Sensitive to the pain of difference, he adds: “To drop monologue is to immediately discover the other ... the discovery of the other, of our own being, is both soothing and painful, more the latter ... It is right in the middle of this pain and anxiety that a Divine Sign is known.”<sup>11</sup>

These are just brief indications of what an interdisciplinary investigation of the space between might look like – if social scientific, philosophical and theological perspectives were allowed to enrich each other, in a conversation in which scholars not only from different disciplines but also from different faith traditions are exploring the realm of between together.

Let me end with a multidimensional understanding of in-between space developed by David Ford in his explication of Scriptural Reasoning as a modality of Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue. Relating to Scriptural Reasoning’s triple metaphor of houses, tents and campuses as places for tradition-specific, dialogical and scholarly readings respectively, Ford states that “inbetweenness” is a significant metaphor for Scriptural Reasoning as a spiritual as well as public effort:

It is concerned with what happens in the *interpretative* space between the three scriptures; in the *social* space between mosque, church and synagogue; in the *intellectual* space between ‘houses’ and ‘campuses’, and between the disciplines on the campuses; in the *religious and secular* space between the houses and the various spheres and institutions of society; and in the *spiritual* space between interpreters of scripture and God<sup>12</sup>

As for the fundamental question of whether the idea of “interreligious studies” presupposes a notion of religions as separate entities between which spaces open or close, I leave it to my colleague Anne Hege Grung to discuss whether – in an age of cultural complexity – it is more fitting to speak of “trans-religious” relations and studies.<sup>13</sup>

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11 Askari, Hasan. “The dialogical relationship between Christianity and Islam” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9 (1972), 485f.

12 Ford, David. “An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims,” in D. Ford and C. C. Pecknold ed. *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 12.

13 Cf. her contribution in this issue of JIRS titled “Inter-religious or Trans-religious. Exploring the Term ‘Inter-religious’ in a Feminist Postcolonial Perspective.”

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