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Learning Religion in the Presence of the Other: Mission and Dialogue in World Catholicism

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Learning Religion in the Presence of the Other: Mission and Dialogue in World Catholicism



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Based on selected texts of the Second Vatican Council and related to the process of the Council and Church experiences thereafter, this article offers a brief insight into the theological method known as communicative theology (CT).¹ The influence of liberation theology is obvious. The methodical insight which is the focus of the research published in two different book series is proven in one of the factors most challenging to mission and dialogue in world Catholicism: the perpetual presence of the “other” as a stranger.² Learning religion in the presence of the “other” is not the exception; in reality, it is very typical of mission and dialogue in Africa as well as in Europe.

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF DOING THEOLOGY AFTER THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

The Second Vatican Council, as well as some encyclicals that followed it, inherited not only doctrinal aspects but also offered new methodologies for doing theology. The “theological culture” identified as communicative theology (CT) is aware of these methodologies.³ In this article, I will offer some brief insights on the theme, “The Future of Catholicism in Africa.” To do this, I cannot remain a distant author; rather, I must involve myself.

To Keep Silent, Listen, and Learn: Basic Attitudes for Mission and Dialogue based on *Gaudium et Spes* and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*⁴

When it comes to the future of Catholicism in Africa, I must keep silent. As a Euro-

1 See Scharer, “Learning (in/through) Religion in the Presence of the Other,” In *Anders Gemeinsam—Gemeinsam Anders? In Ambivalenzen Lebendig Kommunizieren*, eds. Maria Juen, Gunter Prüller-Jagenteufel, et al., 223-38, (Ostfildern: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 2015).

2 See the following two 18-volume book series: (1) *Kommunikative Theologie*, edited by Bernd Jochen Hilberath and Matthias Scharer and published by Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag and (2) *Communicative Theology: Reflections on the Culture of Our Practice of Theology*, edited by Bernd Jochen Hilberath, Bradford E. Hinze, and Matthias Scharer, and published by LIT Verlag.

3 Scharer and Hilberath, *The Practice of Communicative Theology: Introduction to a New Theological Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2008).

4 See Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World], Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html; and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) [On Evangelization in the Modern World], Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1975, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html



pean (Austrian) theologian, all that I can do is listen to the African people and learn from their culture and religion. There are many great misunderstandings and injuries caused by Catholics of the global North. Thus, theologians finding themselves in new contexts should first be silent, listening to what people are explaining, both with and without words: e.g., in their prayers, symbols, rites, stories, and through the testimony of their lives. And these basic attitudes are not only for theologians of the North coming to the global South; they are possible for everyone engaged in mission and dialogue.

“God is already there before the missionary arrives,” Leonardo Boff asserts.⁵ The basic attitudes of listening and learning require deep trust in the Holy Spirit who is breathing within all people—not only Christians or Catholics—from the beginning of their lives. It is as valid for people within their own group as it is for the “others.”

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber argues that, between the “Me” and the “You,” the gift of real encounter happens as long as no one uses the other as an “It,” an object.⁶ Children are especially vulnerable to being treated as an “It.” The deepest injury to the psyche occurs when religious and sexual damages are at work together. The role of dialogue in mission is undermined when the other becomes an object of mission, an object of pastoral care, an object of catechesis, or an object of evangelization. The challenge of dialogue in mission is not only the “me-you” relationships, but as the French-Lithuanian Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argues: that when I encounter the face of the “other,” there is also the possibility of engagement with “the third” who demands my attention and provokes my responsibility.⁷

When I was in Peru with Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founder of liberation theology, I learned an important lesson that has influenced my theological method very deeply.⁸ It happened in a group of European theologians who were spending a week

5 See Leonardo Boff, *Gott kommt früher als der Missionar: Neueangelisierung für eine Kultur des Lebens und der Freiheit*, trans. Horst Goldstein (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1991).

6 See Martin Buber, *Ich und Du*, 11th ed. (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1983).

7 See Emmanuel Lévinas and Wolfgang Nikolaus Krewani, *Totalität und Unendlichkeit: Versuch über die Exteriorität* (Freiburg: Alber, 1993), 2. Auflage.

8 See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 4th ed. (Maryknoll,



working with Gustavo. One very famous German theologian wanted to stay and work with him for a full year. When this professor of dogmatic theology asked Gustavo if he could do this, we all could feel how shocked Gustavo was for a moment. First, Gustavo asked the professor to return to Germany and share his experiences in Peru with others. But the professor insisted: “I want to stay and work with you for one year.” At that point, Gustavo became very serious and said: “If you want to do this, please don’t make any dogmatic proposition for the whole year: listen and learn.” And because of this reaction, the professor returned to Germany.

When I am teaching students for pastoral ministry, catechesis, and religious education, I train them first to listen and learn from children, young people, adults, and the elderly. One basic skill of a pastor or teacher—priest, bishop, or lay person—is the ability to understand what people are doing and saying as biographical and communicative signs of the times, as Vatican II teaches. As *Gaudium et Spes* points out, to understand these authentic signs in the light of the gospel requires attitudes of listening and learning.⁹ This is similar to the “evangelization without words” as emphasized by Paul VI:

Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, also, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness, these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here we have an initial act of evangelization.¹⁰

NY: Orbis, 1973).

⁹ Paul VI, *GS*, 4.

¹⁰ Paul VI, *EN*, 21.



Limited and Hopeful Perspectives Within a “Bruised, Hurting, and Dirty Church Out on the Street,” based on *Nostra Aetate*¹¹ and *Evangelii Gaudium*

If you want me to say something more about the processes of mission and dialogue, I must acknowledge that I am deeply aware of my limited perspectives. My limitation is not only that of being a European-Austrian. It is also one that is inherent in my discipline. If I am working in the field of catechetics, mission, and dialogue, I am not mainly method-driven when I consider how we can bring people into the Church. Involved in church mission and dialogue, I am primarily doing theology. In my understanding, practical theology, in general, is not the appendix or the application of (systematic) theology as it had been in the new scholastic period. Learning from Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and other important theologians during the Vatican II process, we must deconstruct theology from above. In this context, Paul Tillich spoke about a metaphysical kind of theology. The Catholic version was the new scholastic theology. In the aftermath of Tillich, the choice is not humanistic theology. After deconstructing the new scholastic or metaphysical theology, we must construct theology in a correlation between the re-reading of Gospel and tradition and value grassroots experience. The field of academic theology must acknowledge the theological dignity of the grassroots experience—in other words, the experience of each person as a potentially autonomous, free, and interdependent subject; the experience of the community; and the contextual experience. In his famous interview with Antonio Spadaro in 2013, Pope Francis said: “Vatican II was a re-reading of the Gospel in light of contemporary culture.”¹²

At the research level, the consequence of a “re-reading of the Gospel in light of contemporary culture” is to value empirical studies that make us aware of people’s lives. But what kind of empirical studies do we need to be near to the day-to-day life of the people? I agree with the pope that “finding God in all things is not an ‘empirical eureka’; rather it requires a spiritual sensitivity to encounter God beyond

11 Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate* (NA) [Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions], Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1965, http://w2.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

12 Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *America*, September 30, 2013, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>.



a purely empirical approach.”¹³ Theologians who are researching basic insights in mission and dialogue must ensure that their research methods correlate with such a spiritual sensitivity. In general, Christian theology entails re-reading the Gospel, as well as the book of life, with a spiritual awareness of encountering God “in the world of today.”¹⁴

This does not mean discrediting experiences that, to our eyes, are “bad.” Pope Francis confesses:

I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person’s life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs, or anything else, God is in this person’s life. You can—you must—try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of a person is a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow. You have to trust God.¹⁵

When the pope encourages us to see God in every person’s life, he is trying to open our hearts to the new reality of dialogue. Step by step, the Holy Spirit leads us through a very challenging learning process to understand the diversity and plurality of people—of individuals, their beliefs, and religions—as a gift and a grace, not as an enticement to relativism.

I am aware of the great danger of violence stimulated by fundamentalists in every religion. I fear this in my own Church and in other faiths. I agree with Hans Küng, the senior theologian of Tübingen who established the project “World Ethics,” when he proclaims that there will be no peace on earth without peace between religions.

We have to learn a little bit more about what *Nostra Aetate* means when it encourages us to encounter people of all faiths, especially Jews and Muslims who are our nearest sisters and brothers. A plurality of religions, beliefs, and worldviews is one of the most important signs of the times for us to respect.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.



In my department at Innsbruck University, the rooms where the Karl Rahner Archives were previously located now house the Muslim Studies Department, with a Muslim professor and his Muslim team. I am sure that Karl Rahner would be happy with this development, because he did not only claim but also truly practiced the learning process of encounter and experience with people of other faiths and beliefs. This is evident in a book he edited entitled the *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* (*Handbook of Pastoral Theology*) and in a book he wrote, *The Shape of the Church to Come*.¹⁶

If we are going to speak about the future of Catholicism in any part of our world, we must realize what *Gaudium et Spes* proclaims and what Pope Francis lives personally:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.¹⁷

As he proclaims in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis does not want a Church concerned with being at the center and, ultimately, caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. In line with *Gaudium et Spes*, he wants “a Church which is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church that is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”¹⁸

Outstanding Prophecy Helps Us to Do Theology Out on the Streets

If church mission and dialogue is to take place out on the street, theology cannot simply be grasped in the library or the lecture hall. Gustavo Gutiérrez taught us Europeans a lesson about theology on the streets that I shall never forget. When we were with him in Peru, he finished his lectures and conversations with us every day at 4 p.m. so that he could go to be with the people in a small *comunidad* on the

16 Franz Xavier Arnold, Karl Rahner, et al., *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964); Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983). The original title in German is *Strukturwandel der Kirche als Aufgabe und Chance*.

17 Paul VI, *GS*, 1.

18 Francis, *EG*, 49.



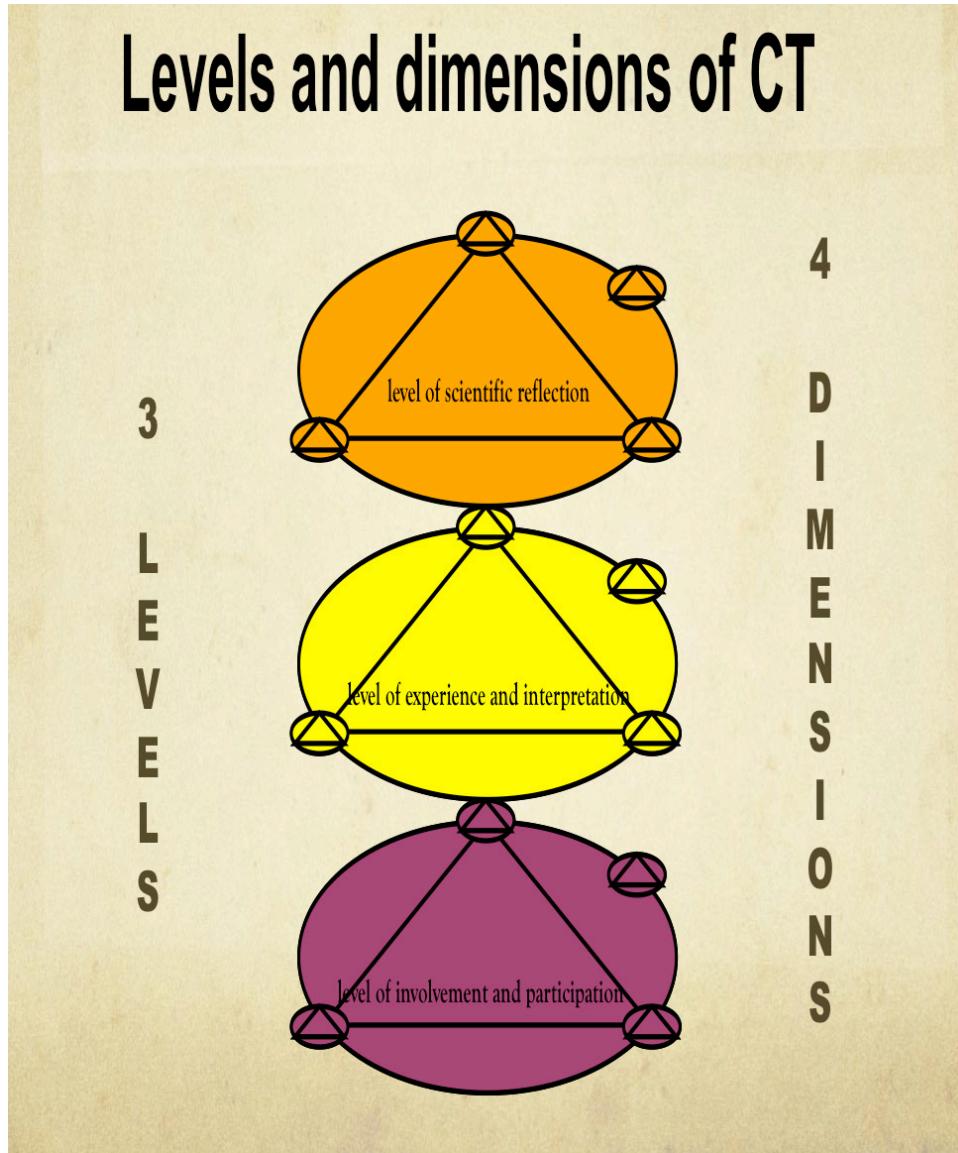


Figure 1: Scharer, "Living Communication in a Digital Media Context," 7.

peripheries of Lima. He wanted us to understand: "You can't know anything about God, human beings, community, society if you don't live out on the street, especially with the poor."

To realize this theological insight more fully, I work with others in CT on advancing "a new theological culture," which is how Brad Hinze and Mary Ann Hinsdale subtitled the English edition of *The Practice of Community Theology*, written by Jo-



chen Hilberath and myself.¹⁹ We understand theology as a process. A theological process can be experienced at multiple levels of encounters. In doing CT, we oscillate — as Figure 1 shows — between:

- the level of the immediate encounter of men and women/individuals in plural communities and out on the street;
- the level of their experience and interpretations;
- the level of conceptually structured theological discourse, which is the level of explicit research.

CT has been deeply inspired by a type of learning and communication known as theme-centered interaction (TCI), which was developed by German-Jewish psychotherapist Ruth C. Cohn (1912-2010).

Gunda Werner and some others on the research board of CT have been educated and working in this kind of group work for years. As Dennis M. Doyle writes in a report on CT:

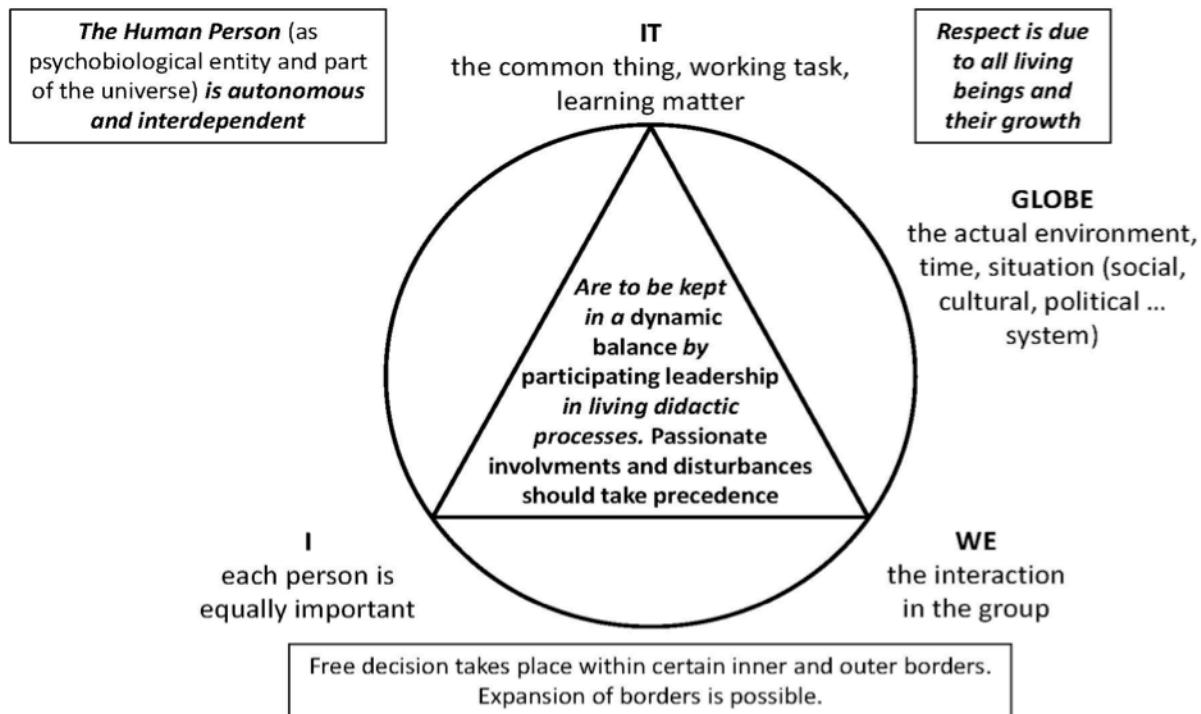
Cohn's approach is noteworthy for its attempt to overcome various false dichotomies between the subjective and the objective, content and application, teacher and learner, freedom and interdependency, the self and the other, the individual and the group, the immediate community and the larger society. It incorporates various paradoxical measures such as slowing down to get more done; letting go to make progress and focusing on disturbances and conflicts to build up stronger groups.²⁰

On the graph, you can see that the three levels are expanded as triangles in spheres. The different triangles in the sphere come from the TCI concept in which we speak about the dynamic balance between I, We, It, and Globe. Influenced by Rahner, Buber, Levinas, Ricoeur, and others and engaging the various theological loci, we see and understand the theme-centered interaction factors theologically as dimen-

19 Such as Gunda Werner and Brad Hinze.

20 Dennis M. Doyle, "Interruptive Connections: The Promise of Communicative Theology," *Ecclesiology* 10 (2014) 252.





sions that represent the loci from where we can think of God and the human being, which is what every theology does.

Figure 2: Scharer, "Living Communication in a Digital Media Context," 9.

WHOM DO WE MEET ON THE STREET WHEN IT COMES TO MISSION AND DIALOGUE?

Ten years after the end of Vatican II, the Würzburg Synod in Germany reflected on religious education and catechesis.²¹ The nucleus of the synod text we can find in the "General Directory for Catechesis."²² As the Würzburg Synod text states, the directory differentiates catechesis (which should be used in Christian communities especially for catechumens and in religious education in school) as addressed to all children and youth. In the synod text, the directory speaks of "believers," of students "who are searching," and of students "who are non-believers." Religious education has to make sense for everyone.²³

21 Ludwig Bertsch and Gemeinsame Synode der Bistümer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, eds. *Beschlüsse Der Vollversammlung* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1978). 4. Auflage.

22 Kongregation für den Klerus, *Allgemeines Direktorium für die Katechese* (Bonn: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 1997), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_17041998_directory-for-catechesis_ge.html.

23 See Scharer, "Der Synodenbeschluss zum Religionsunterricht in der Schule: Heute Gelesen und im Blick auf Morgen Weitergeschrieben." *Österreichisches Religionspädagogisches Forum* 17 (2009): 30-38.



Whom do we meet on the street fifty years after Vatican II and forty years after the Würzburg Synod? This I cannot know for Nigeria or Africa in general. When it comes to the question of religious diversity, one of Ruth Cohn's postulates becomes important: "Disturbances and passionate involvements take precedence."²⁴ All who are involved in mission and dialogue need an awareness of real life, especially in terms of diversity and the crises people experience. Pope Francis is aware of the conflicts but also of the grace with which diversity is connected; in *EG*, he says:

Differences between persons and communities can sometimes prove uncomfortable, but the Holy Spirit, who is the source of that diversity, can bring forth something good from all things and turn it into an attractive means of evangelization. Diversity must always be reconciled by the help of the Holy Spirit; he alone can raise up diversity, plurality and multiplicity while at the same time bringing about unity. When we, for our part, aspire to diversity, we become self-enclosed, exclusive and divisive; similarly, whenever we attempt to create unity on the basis of our human calculations, we end up imposing a monolithic uniformity. This is not helpful for the Church's mission.²⁵

Whom do we meet on the streets of diverse, plural, multiple societies? If I take a look at the global North, I am aware of globalized societies in which the religious monocultures that persisted into the 20th century have given way to a world of varied religious convictions and worldviews. In Europe, sometimes it gives rise to a "fear of religion" as the well-known sociologist of religion José Casanova has discussed.²⁶

As we can see all over the world, the diversity of religions can lead to conflicts — sometimes violent conflicts — but also to a better understanding between people. One of the most important aims of mission and dialogue in a plural society would seem to be encouraging people to treat others with respect, tolerance, and sympathy to avoid conflicts that degenerate into violence.

24 Ruth Cohn and Alfred Farau, *Gelebte Geschichte der Psychotherapie: Zwei Perspektiven*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008), 360.

25 Francis, *EG*, 131.

26 José Casanova, *Europas Angst vor der Religion*, (Wiesbaden: Berlin University Press, 2009).



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S APPROACH TO CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Vatican II brought about some new principles regulating the Catholic Church's approach to cultural and religious pluralism. I will recall some of these here:

- The central significance of conscience. The council calls it the most concealed center and the inner sanctum of the individual, where s/he is at one with God, whose voice can be heard from within.²⁷
- The emphasis on the right of every individual to freedom of religion.²⁸ In this context, children's rights are particularly important as children are most vulnerable when exposed to religious abuse when religion is turned into an ideology.
- The recognition of many paths to salvation in different religions and their specific value/ esteem.²⁹ This means neither an
 - ◊ inclusivism, as indiscriminate absorption of other religions and cultural attitudes into one's own;
 - ◊ nor exclusivism, as a dogmatic isolation of one's claim to truth;
 - ◊ nor undifferentiating pluralism claiming that we are all the same/all one and believe essentially the same thing.

Encounter and communication in plurality are central competencies we must teach and learn.

'LEARNING RELIGION IN THE PRESENCE OF THE OTHER' (MARY C. BOYS)

To get a deeper understanding of what mission and dialogue in plurality means,

27 Paul VI, *GS*, 16.

28 See Paul VI, *GS*, 17; Paul VI, *Dignitatis Humanae (DH)* [Declaration on Religious Freedom] (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1990), 2 and 10. http://w2.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.

29 See Paul VI, *NA*, 2.



I refer to the American religious educator Mary C. Boys who created the phrase “learning in the presence of the Other.”³⁰ Learning in the presence of the Other is the test case of mission and dialogue, as Pope Francis shows us nearly every day. During his last visit to Africa, he experienced this learning process for himself and the Church by visiting a mosque under extremely dangerous circumstances.

Respecting the possibilities of new media in worldwide communication³¹ in the future means that there will be no space in the world that is not affected by the differences of religions and worldviews. Based on my experience in India, where I have been in communication with Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and others, as well as my deep friendships with Muslims in Austria and Germany, I can claim that whoever is prepared to *learn in the presence of the Other* just as the Other will be missed by them/him. Although this does not necessitate physical presence, learning in the presence of the Other has a different quality than the many interreligious dialogues that take place. If Ramadan is imminent, then I find myself in a personal relationship not with Muslims in general, but with Hamideh, Hülya, Ednan, Zekirija, Fuat and all the names my Muslim friends and colleagues bear. I know further that the fellow believers, sisters and brothers in faith, are thinking of me when we celebrate Christmas or Easter.

Mission and dialogue provide a substantially inadequate description of what learning in the presence of the Other is about: it is the immediate encounter of individuals with different religious or cultural backgrounds, which are foreign and are allowed to remain so without affecting the relationship between individuals. Indeed, it is the foreignness and Other-ness that adds the spice to our relationships.

LIVING IN THE ‘BORDERLAND’ AND RESPECTING THE HOLY GROUND BETWEEN EACH ‘OTHER’

It was in the second century, about 130 AD, when Diognetus — an “Other” — wanted to know what is essential for Christians. In the famous “Letter to Diogene-

30 Mary C. Boys, “Learning in the Presence of the Other,” *Religious Education* 103, no. 5 (2008): 502-506.

31 Scharer, “Living Communication in a Digital Media Context: Meanings (Criteria) from the Perspective of Communicative Theology,” *Communication Research Trends* 32, no. 3 (2013): 6-12.



tus,” we read:

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind, either in the locality in speech or customs; for they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own. They neither use a different language nor practice an extraordinary kind of life. They don’t possess any invention discovered by ingenious men and are not masters of any human dogma. While they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians and follow the native customs in dress, food and lifestyle, the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvelous and confessedly contradicts expectations. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like all other men and they beget children, but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wife’s. They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.³²

As the Protestant theologian Michael Naunser figures out, the homeland of Christians is always in the borderland.³³ Typical of the borderland situation is to live in cultural and religious plurality; you learn “in the presence of the Other.” And learning in the presence of the Other encourages competence in the selective authenticity involved in the treatment of one’s religious convictions and those of the Other. We cannot expect a kind of religious “soul searching” in each and every possible situation, resulting in the exposure of cultural orientation and religious conviction in public, nor are we concerned about hiding our convictions even in their symbolic ritual practices.

In this context, the metaphor found in the Old Testament of Moses’s confrontation with God (in Exodus 3) seems applicable. It is the metaphor of the “holy ground” which can be transferred to this intimate religious sphere. If anything, we should

32 Bernd Lorenz, *Der Brief an Diognet*, my own translation (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1982).

33 See Michael Naunser, “Heimat als Grenzland: Territorien Christlicher Subjektivität,” in *Postkoloniale Theologien: Bibelhermeneutische Und Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge*, eds. Andreas Nehring and Simon Tielesch, 187–202 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer GmbH, 2013).



tread the holy ground of the foreign “Other” barefoot, that is, with the greatest amount of respect, acknowledging the greatest possible freedom of the “Other.” The “Other” should certainly not be trampled on, as this would be tantamount to committing a religious transgression.



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