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Curiosity Instead of Fear: Literature as Creative Inter-Religious Dialogue

By Ruth Illman

Abstract

The aim of this article is to present an ongoing research project focusing on art as a holistic, personal and creative arena for inter-religious dialogue and to offer analytical reflections on such a renewed and integrated research agenda. Its findings, from a case study with literature, suggest that creative forms of dialogue can foment a fruitful combination of practical and ethical concerns and theoretical reflections. Empirical examples are given from interviews with two authors engaged in inter-religious dialogue: Jewish novelist Susanne Levin and the Christian playwright and novelist Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt.

Introduction

I think really, we writers, we have a lot to do. We have a kind of mission: to create greater understanding, greater curiosity, greater tolerance and to make people accept the complexity of our identities, of our societies ... Yes, to create wisdom. That's the purpose of books.

These thoughts, which novelist and playwright Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, presented to me in an interview in June 2008, touch the heart of the research topic presented in this article: art, and especially literature, as a tool for inter-religious dialogue. To Schmitt, the task of creating inter-religious understanding and respect lies at the heart of his professional project. Writers may not be powerful players on the global political scene, he admits, but their work can nevertheless influence opinions and attitudes. This limited but productive power can be used to effect change: to increase the readers' imaginative interest in lives and realities utterly different from their own and evoke empathy towards other ways of embodying and expressing our shared but vulnerable human circumstances.

The aim of this article is to further analyze and discuss this position by posing the following three questions: Can the creative perspectives of religious otherness offered in literature promote respect, reliance, and reciprocity between persons of different faiths? Can fictitious stories build bridges of understanding and create positive openings in inter-religious situations? What is the role of the writer in this transformative process? The empirical analysis builds on reflections presented by two writers who deal in their novels with questions of religious difference and inter-religious dialogue: the above mentioned French author, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, who is inspired by the Christian gospels, and the Swedish author, Susanne Levin, who is Jewish.

A Creative Perspective on Inter-Religious Dialogue

Different forms of art – such as literature, music and film – are often used to portray the multi-religious and ethnically mixed situation prevailing in our world today. Such projects can either present a positive perspective on inter-religious encounters, advocating peace and human dignity, or a negative one, instigating division and enmity. Even so, creative forms of inter-religious dialogue are seldom analyzed in academic articles. Research topics are typically more sober and rational in appearance, such as the classical questions of who possesses the truth, and how to come to terms with the problem of difference (Deutsch 2004, 99). Opposing voices critique this intellectualized definition of truth. Willy Pfändtner notes that to regard different religions simply as rational belief systems with incompatible truth claims implies a problematic distortion of the multifaceted phenomenon under investigation, and offers rather limited prospects for inter-religious dialogue (Pfändtner 2005, 16, 19). To describe our contemporary situation, Marc Gopin suggests that models for meaningful co-existence need to be built on a comprehensive understanding of unique individuals rather than on abstract systems of thought. What is needed is an understanding of how dialogical world views are expressed in practical situations: How do those persons, who live deeply engaged in religious meaning systems, think and act and also show care beyond these boundaries (Gopin 2005, 56)?

The main aim of a research project I am currently pursuing is to provide such an alternative perspective – practical in application but intellectually thorough – focusing on art as a holistic, personal and creative arena of dialogue. The project investigates the forms and functions of inter-religious dialogue, primarily within the Abrahamic triad of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Focus is directed towards the contemporary inter-religious scene and its practical and ethical dimensions, rather than doctrinal comparisons. Comprehensive knowledge of the dialogue between these religions is of growing importance. As religions are increasingly regarded in a one-sided fashion as sources of intolerance and enmity, it is vital to achieve a deeper understanding for other, creative aspects of religious engagement (ter Haar 2005, 20-21). Hence, the project seeks an understanding of how persons engaging in creative forms of dialogue through different kinds of art create their religious identity in the juxtaposition of unity and separateness – honoring the dignity of difference while simultaneously promoting interdependence and the responsibility to cross the lines of faith respectfully (Esack 1987, 180). The interviews presented in this article are part of a larger body of empirical material collected for this project, which also includes interviews with musicians, filmmakers, poets and multimedia artists.

In order to bring forth new insight within the field of inter-religious dialogue, a theoretical commitment to diversity is needed. Therefore, the views of scholars rooted in different religious and academic traditions (such as comparative religion, theology, intercultural communication and conflict resolution theory) should be integrated. Dialogue with the religious other needs to be viewed as a multidimensional process of interpretation and as a tangible question of peace, action, and power. By directing attention away from a purely rational view of inter-religious dialogue towards a more multifaceted understanding

of human religiosity, a more diverse knowledge base can be created, with a fruitful combination of academic approaches and perspectives from outside the Western world (Pfändtner 2005, 105). Thus, my aim is to provide a way of tackling issues of discursive power, cultural and religious essentialism, and the intellectual bias of current inter-religious theory.

The present challenges that motivate such a renewed agenda are manifold. At a global level, the question of how to facilitate respectful inter-religious dialogue seems vital, especially in the close but complicated relationship between the children of Abraham (Russell 2006, 185). Furthermore, the role of religion in society seems to be under rapid transformation, described by Inger Furseth as a move from “finding truth” to “finding or being oneself (Furseth 2006, 296).” Hence, dogmatic and theoretical aspects of religions attract less interest as the demand for emotionally fulfilling experiences of faith increases. Religion is understood as an old-fashioned and rigid term, and consequently many people prefer the open and experimental notion of spirituality (Martikainen 2007, 367-370). Locating religious traditions within given geographical or social contexts is also becoming problematic, as people and ideas migrate around the world, drawn by adventure or forced by violence and poverty. On a personal level, many people no longer recognize the tradition of their parents as the one, self-evident, existential truth for themselves. Rather, religious identity is seen as a personal project of development: a flexible identification with ideas, expressions and sentiments suiting one’s outlook on life (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 3).

Even so, change and choice are ambiguous concepts, greeted by some with suspicion rather than excitement. In uncertain situations, differences in religion, culture, age, gender, class or political ideals are used to legitimate repudiation of the other (Omar 2006, 19). The effects range from discrimination to dehumanization, but the key problem is the same: difference is experienced as an anomaly, an unwanted threat. Information is often seen as a solution to such conflicts, as increased knowledge about the other is thought to replace prejudices with understanding and respect (Safi 2003, 3). Thus, dialogue is connected to knowledge, rational reasoning, consistency, and predictability. The problem of coming to terms with difference is thus regarded as an intellectual challenge of making the other intelligible and creating consistency in philosophical systems that propose contradictory ways of understanding notions such as truth, divinity and salvation (Pfändtner 2005, 109). Such text and tradition oriented efforts are of great importance for inter-religious dialogue, but seldom reach beyond the academic world to affect dialogue as a lived practice (Omar 2006, 18).

Furthermore, the fear of difference is not based on facts and reasoning alone. Our opinions and interpretations are formed and fed by emotions and experiences that have made an impact on us from early on in life and structure our responses to new situations in potentially irrational ways. Coming to terms with difference is not just a question of knowledge – it touches us on a deeper level as complex, interpreting, and insecure human beings. Therefore, many researchers today advocate more holistic approaches to dialogue in order to meet the challenges set forth by our contemporary circumstances. Dialogue, it is argued, is not merely a cognitive capacity, but also an emotional engagement striving towards empathic recognition of the other as having a different but equally legitimate perspective on the world (Gross 1999, 365). To this background, it is valuable to add Willy

Pfändtner's proposition to exchange religion for the *religious* in research on dialogue. Focusing on the religious subject stresses the active and interpersonal aspects of the communication and allows us to observe differences and similarities both within and between traditions (Pfändtner 2005, 16). Furthermore, it allows us to broaden the perspective of our investigations to include human characteristics, such as attitudes and emotions.

Similar integrated approaches to inter-religious dialogue are currently envisioned through, for example, feminist critiques and hermeneutic discourses, which also aim to explore alternative empirical research fields (Safi 2003, 11-15). Therefore the arts as arenas for inventive practices are recognized as complements to theoretical investigations and rhetorical debates. Here it is argued that the freedom of the creative approach can be experienced as a supplement to theoretical rules and regulations; imagination can play an enriching role, through which all aspects of our personalities can be engaged in building the dialogue (Bird 1995, v).

Using Fiction to Promote Dialogue: Two Writers' Voices

With these critical remarks in mind, it is time to turn to the empirical material and give voice to the writers Susanne Levin and Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt.¹ How do they interpret their roles as artists engaged in inter-religious dialogue? How do they assess the possibility of novels to promote the broad, interpretative approach to inter-religious dialogue formulated in the theoretical discussion?

Susanne Levin (b. 1950) is the child of an Auschwitz survivor. She was born and raised in Sweden, where there is a small Jewish minority. To her, writing is a question of the heart; she feels compelled to write in order to endure and come to terms with the complexities of her Jewish heritage and to understand her own identity. Writing is thus necessary to survive. All her life, Levin explains, she has searched for meaning: Why did my mother survive? What is my responsibility? Therefore, she states: "I started to write in order to show the world what it means to be me, the child of a survivor. I feel I have a mission." Levin's motivation to write novels about inter-religious encounters, difference and estrangement – often with an autobiographical element – was triggered by her encounter with racist and anti-Semitic sentiments in the school where she works. There, she says, "I saw all those children they want to exclude in order to 'preserve Sweden Swedish.'" All of those frightened and silenced immigrant children reminded her of herself as a young girl who did not fit in: wrong hair color, wrong family name, wrong religion.

Levin frequently uses her novels as she teaches religion in multi-religious school classes. She is convinced that novels can reach out to young people, awaken their empathic abilities and create a respectful understanding of differences much more effectively than theoretical texts:

I'm certain that a novel can move people much deeper than scholarly reports. Because you can identify with the little girl, you can understand what it is like to be her, to feel estranged and be scared of making your voice heard. I am convinced that novels can touch the hearts of teenagers, I have seen it.

To “meet each other in respect” is the meaning of inter-religious dialogue to Levin, and she is certain that literature can be of great importance in facilitating such meetings, even though a novel may seem like a feeble tool. “The world is big and there is much evil in it, but you have to do your share,” Levin argues. “You have to believe in yourself and your ability to effect change.” To her, Judaism is about continuously building a kingdom of peace on earth, and her mission as a Jew within this broader process is to write novels. No one can change the whole world, but you have to find your own task and transform what is within your reach: “As it says in Talmud: the one who has saved a life, *one* life, he has saved the whole world! What more can you ask for?”

Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt (b. 1960) has reached a worldwide audience with his plays and novels on inter-religious dialogue, especially the series of four short novellas called *Le Cycle d’Invisible*. These narratives all deal with inter-religious encounters in a complex and compassionate way, as Schmitt is particularly concerned with preserving the mystery and divine nature of the situations he describes. To him, inter-religious encounters are complex challenges where not only two religions (as theoretical and historical constructions) stand against each other, but so do two human beings. In his compositions, the areas of difference transformed in the encounter are not one but several: Muslim-Jew, young-old, happy-sad, powerful-powerless, convinced-confused. Schmitt details, “I am obsessed with complexity! For me, it is a mistake to desire a simple solution, a simple truth, a unique algebraist formula. It’s terrible because it’s impossible. You have to fight against this obsession of simple ideas in order to accept complexity.” As shown in the introduction of this article, Schmitt interprets his task as a writer in a manner similar to that of Levin: to create understanding, respect and openness between persons of different faiths. Literature is the sense of complexity, Schmitt asserts, its purpose to legitimate different perspectives. “The purpose is not: What is true? The purpose is: How is it possible to live together?” Therefore, novels can be helpful in creating awareness of the necessity of a pluralistic humanity. Accepting complexity is the human way to survive. Including emotions in the description of inter-religious encounters is vital for Schmitt; it is one of the reasons why he abandoned a successful academic career as a philosopher to become a writer of fiction. Feelings often mark the beginning of an intellectual journey, he believes, because “you have to think inside life, inside your body, with your emotions.” This is where art becomes important to inter-religious dialogue, Schmitt concludes. By telling a fictitious but engaging story you can give your readers access to the religious other in a fresh and open, empathic and enriching way. In this respect, literature is much more effective than rational arguments: “It has to be incarnated; it has to be flesh and blood and feelings.”

Curiosity instead of fear and richness instead of one-dimensional truth claims are thus the guiding principles for Schmitt in his writing. Humor is another important element, he claims, because believing without humor becomes fanaticism: “I fight for humor in religions! I think it’s really an ethical point of view. It’s to be aware that you don’t know for sure, that you are weak, fragile and have no certainties. That’s humor.”

Schmitt calls himself a voluntary optimist, who has chosen to believe in the ability of literature to function as a creative and uniting counter-power to the economic rules and

political tyranny of our contemporary society. “A pessimist says: Okay Satan, do your work, I don’t care. But I care. And if there is something I can do, I will. That’s optimism.”

Conclusion: The Multifaceted Dialogue

In the presentation above, I have underlined the need for a shift in focus within the research on inter-religious dialogue. The view of dialogue as a purely intellectual process of making the religious other intelligible should be complemented by an understanding of the ethical, essentially human demands such encounters place on us. Thus, my aim has been to show the inadequacy of the traditional approach and instead provide an integrated, dialogical approach to religious difference as an alternative position within the frameworks of the Abrahamic traditions. In accord with Pfändtner, I regard dialogue as a creative and dynamic activity that brings about understanding, though not necessarily agreement (Pfändtner 2005, 21). What I call for, consequently, is a perspective on dialogue that acknowledges the structuring power of tradition, theology, and text, but is simultaneously open to the individual and her interpretation of the inter-religious situation. In my opinion, dialogue is doing – it is an activity carried out by human beings who embody thoughts and feelings, interpretations and memories, traditions and emotions in their different and creative ways of dialoguing.

The views of writers Susanne Levin and Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt exemplify this theoretical discussion in an apt way. Both of them portray dialogue as a multifaceted process of intellectual reflection, emotional experiences, and concrete action. As artists engaged in inter-religious dialogue, they both underscore the power of art in general, and literature in particular, to function as creative and constructive tools in the encounter between persons of different faiths. For Levin, literature fills this function mainly by awaking empathy for the religious other. For Schmitt, the vital contribution of literature to inter-religious dialogue lies in its ability to present a complex image of reality in which incongruity and contradiction is allowed. The authors thereby answer the questions posed in the beginning of this article in the affirmative: fictitious stories can build bridges of understanding, promote respect and offer new openings in the inter-religious encounter. Furthermore, the ways in which they discuss religion and art exemplify the fundamental nature of inter-religious dialogue as a creative, complex, intrinsically human and dynamic activity.

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Notes

ⁱ The following analysis is based on interviews conducted by the author, with Levin in May 2008 and with Schmitt in June 2008. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed into text documents. All quotations in the text refer to these transcripts, which are stored at Åbo Akademi University (see reference list for details). The interview with Schmitt was conducted in English, but the interview with Levin was conducted in Swedish. The author has translated Levin's quotations.