INTRODUCTION

In our current context of increasing globalization and interconnection between people from all over the world, the plurality and diversity of religious traditions is becoming progressively more apparent. This awareness has led individuals and communities to respond to
the present multi-religious situation in various ways. It is a fundamental supposition of this paper that the most practical, peaceful, and thus productive answer to our growing pluralistic environment has been and continues to be intentional dialogue and engagement among people of differing religions in an atmosphere of equality and respect. This is grounded in the practical experience and theoretical analysis of interreligious relations undertaken by various religious practitioners and thinkers, including myself.\(^1\) With this underlying, foundational premise this essay intends to outline the origins of the interfaith movement, illustrate a paradigm shift occurring toward a new postmodern age of global dialogue, explicate some central elements of productive interreligious engagement, and suggest that transformation into greater understanding and truth-disclosure is a possible creative result of dialogical exchange.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND PRESENT POSTMODERN CONTEXT

The World’s Parliament of Religions held at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 is often considered the commencement of the contemporary interfaith movement.\(^2\) This ground-breaking event was couched in the latter part of an era of mounting scholarly study of non-Western religious texts and an emerging awareness of and contact with people of different faith traditions.\(^3\) Although later significant socio-political shifts and legislative enactments in the 1950s and 60s (e.g. Civil Rights movement, counterculture movement, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965) began to open people up to previously unfamiliar and unknown spiritual/religious beliefs and practices, the 1893 Parliament was essentially the first civic event that introduced religious plurality to a considerable portion of the


populace and thus set the stage for the proliferation of interfaith activities in the late 20\textsuperscript{th}-early 21\textsuperscript{st} century world.\textsuperscript{4}

The past century has witnessed a great deal of tension, conflict, and outright violence between cultures, religions, and nations, often precipitated by the anxiety felt in a world of increasingly closer proximity to others. Nonetheless, these circumstances of globalization have also prompted the present burgeoning interest in exchange, cooperation, and peace work among religions in the U.S. and elsewhere around the world. This is evidence of a paradigm shift that has been maturing in the wake of the European Enlightenment since the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Using the terminology of Leonard Swidler, we are in the process of moving from an age of monologue to an age of global dialogue. He states,

\begin{quote}
We can no longer ignore The Other, but we can close our minds and spirits to them, look at them with fear and misunderstanding… It is only by struggling out of the self-centered monologic mindset into dialogue with The Other that we can avoid…cataclysmic disasters. In brief: We must move from the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{quote}

In other words, we are in the midst of this paradigmatic growth into a greater awareness and practice of deliberate engagement with those who are different, unfamiliar, and other as the means to more peaceable – and therefore enlightened – individual, social, and global conditions.

The historian-philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996) wrote of fundamental paradigmatic shifts in \textit{scientific} thinking. He argued that these paradigms are essentially the frameworks of thought within which we position and interpret all information or data, and scientific progress inevitably and necessarily results in alterations of these thought structures.\textsuperscript{6} For example, there was the important Copernican shift from geocentrism (Earth is center) to heliocentrism (sun is center) and also from Newtonian to Quantum physics. Kuhn makes the point that these changes are usually robustly opposed at first, but eventually prevail.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{4} Eck, \textit{New Religious America}, Ch. 1; and McCarthy, \textit{Interfaith Encounters}, 18-19.


\textsuperscript{6} See Thomas Kuhn, \textit{The Structure of Scientific Revolutions}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
conception of paradigm shift is applicable not only in the realm of science but also in other areas of thought, including religion.

The paradigm shift occurring in the wake of the Enlightenment in the West is a transformation of epistemology, the critical consideration of the process by which we come to conceive of and know reality. We have been witnessing a passage from an era where notions of truth and reality are principally absolute, static, and exclusivistic (oneself or group is center of reality and has exclusive access to truth), into an emerging age where truth and reality are de-absolutized and decentralized, and have thus become relational. This period may be characterized as a new postmodern paradigm which celebrates and values plurality, diversity, particularity, and relationality.8

Within this growing postmodern paradigm, it is becoming increasingly clear that no one can know everything about anything. That is, no one has access to the absolute and certain truth about any aspect of reality, or its totality. This is the case in the physical and social sciences, where a biologist is quite aware that s/he cannot claim to know everything about physics, chemistry, or even biology, and a sociologist realizes that s/he cannot proclaim to know everything about psychology, anthropology, or even sociology.9 It is also applicable in the sphere of religion and theology, arguably the most complex, intricate, and comprehensive of all fields of investigation because it is concerned with the whole of reality, reality in its totality.10 Therefore, particularly in realms of critical understanding, there is a growing awareness and recognition that nobody has an epistemic monopoly; no one can convincingly assert any longer that s/he knows everything about anything.

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10 This is grounded in David Tracy’s understanding of religion as not a specific mode of analysis but the human experience of the whole of reality, which includes every facet of human inquiry. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), 159-160.
Swidler presents several ways by which this de-absolutized, relational view of truth and reality can be witnessed in the postmodern paradigm.\(^{11}\) 1) There is the *historical* approach, which perceives that reality is always described in terms of the time and place in which it is expressed. That is to say, any statement of truth or meaning must be understood in relationship to its historical context. 2) Also, there is the *sociological* approach, which claims that all reality is to be conceived as social and cultural. This is an epistemological view where every statement about truth is understood relative to the socio-cultural environment in which it was produced. 3) Additionally, there is the *linguistic* approach, which recognizes the nature of human language as being always couched in a specific environment of idiom and expression, and as having a history of usage that reveals its fluidity, flexibility, and mutability. In this way, language is limited by its employment in a certain linguistic-conceptual framework of comprehension, for not only is there a great variety of human language but also not every word, phrase, or statement in one language means the same thing in all dialects and contexts. Thus, all statements about truth and reality are understood in relationship to the linguistic construction of the statement and the semantic context in which it was formed. 4) Lastly, there is *hermeneutics*, which identifies the perspectival and interpretive character of assertions about truth and reality. The hermeneutical approach acknowledges that any understanding about reality is always grounded in and shaped by the perspective of the interpreter, who is restricted to her/his own historical-cultural-linguistic heritage. This renders all knowledge about reality and claims to truth as being partial, qualified, and relative.

Grounded in the important philosophical works of critical hermeneutical thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, it is becoming ever more apparent that no knowledge is ever completely objective, absolute, and certain. Rather, in this rising postmodern situation, knowledge and understanding is increasingly seen as being subjective,
relative, and rather tentative. We the knowers are an integral and influential part of the process of knowing, such that the knower, the knowing, and the known are inextricably interrelated. All knowledge, understanding, and experience is interpreted, that is, situated in a particular context and conditioned by a historical, cultural, and linguistic circumstance. Swidler aptly summarizes, “So, none of our perceptions and descriptions of reality can be total, complete – absolute in that sense – or objective in the sense of not in any way being dependent on a subject or viewer.”

AIM AND CHARACTER OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

This emerging postmodern paradigm ultimately solicits an important question: If neither I nor anyone else can completely know everything or anything with certainty, if no one can discern objective or absolute Truth, then how does one proceed in gaining a reliable and veracious understanding of reality or truth? Are we completely doomed to utter subjectivity and intractable relativism? How ought we to proceed?

The answer here is, of course, dialogue. And, in the milieu of religion, it is specifically interreligious dialogue – respectful and mutual exchange among persons and communities of diverse faiths.

Even a cursory study of the history of religions evinces that encounter between people of different traditions has lead more often to tension, conflict, and violence than to cooperation, collaboration, and a semblance of peace. In fact, many would argue that this is the unequivocal norm. Most religions have tended toward self-sufficiency rather than mutual reliance, and have expressed a greater or lesser suspicion of other faiths rather than a receptive interest in discovering more about them. As Catherine Cornille asserts,

To the degree that this is so, it stands to reason – if one needs a reason for what is everywhere evident – that the relationship between individuals belonging to different religions is thus often governed by mutual fear and aversion rather than by friendship and

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attraction, and by feelings of superiority and condescension rather than by mutual respect… The very urgency with which religions are being called to engage in peaceful and constructive conversation may in fact signal a certain religious reticence, if not resistance, to dialogue.¹⁴

Indeed, one reason why dialogue has exploded onto the scene in our current times is the need to counteract this history and internal inclination towards fear and aversion of the religiously different. This historical tendency of religions to be reluctant and often opposed to engagement with the religious other speaks to the overarching difficulty of cultivating respectful and lasting interfaith relationships. For most religions, interreligious conversation has been a real challenge.

Nonetheless, dialogue is our most promising response in the postmodern context of plurality and ambiguity. The viability of interreligious encounter in overcoming problems of complete subjectivism and relativism may be found in its character, delineated by many who possess extensive practical and theoretical experience in dialoguing.¹⁵ Through an outline of the purpose and qualities of interfaith encounter, a greater conception of how dialogue surmounts these issues may be gained.

Besides the exterior social goals of creating an environment of further tolerance and harmony among communities, the primary purpose of interreligious dialogue is for each person to learn from the exchange.¹⁶ When one enters into interfaith encounter there is an exchange of information, which elicits a process of increased insight, not only about the other and her/his tradition but also oneself and one’s own tradition. The idea here is that I converse with you primarily so that I may learn something, not so that I try to force you to learn. That is to say, when each party enters the relationship chiefly to learn from the other, then the other becomes the teacher, and therefore mutual learning takes place. However, if each or either side comes to

¹⁵ For instance, Raimon Panikkar, Paul Ingram, Paul Knitter, Leonard Swidler, John Cobb, Jr., Thich Nhat Hanh, Rita Gross, H.H. Dalai Lama, Catherine Cornille, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Diana Eck, among many others.
the encounter principally to teach, this can create feelings of domination or coercion, which closes people up, produces distrust, and thus reciprocal learning does not come about.\textsuperscript{17}

Further, dialogue is more than simply detached, impersonal acquisition of mere facts or data about the other religion. It is concerned with coming to a deeper and more experiential personal understanding of the religious other. This can be gauged in the course of the exchange by the other being able to recognize her/his self and tradition in one’s communicated interpretation of the other’s beliefs and practices.\textsuperscript{18} In other words, if you cannot identify yourself or your religion in the content of what I speak about you or your tradition, then I have not come to a full enough understanding and further clarification and refinement is necessary in the dialogue.

Besides the aim of reciprocal learning and understanding, the character of interreligious dialogue may be articulated by four overarching conditions: 1) doctrinal and epistemic humility, 2) religious commitment, 3) affirmation of otherness, and 4) interconnection.

1) Any possibility of learning and understanding presupposes recognition of the imperfection or incompleteness of oneself and one’s own religious tradition. That is, being able to learn anything at all assumes limitations to one’s knowledge. Otherwise, there would be no room for further increase and expansion. As Panikkar eloquently states,

In the dialogue we are reminded constantly of our temporality, our contingency, our own constitutive limitations. Humility is not primarily a moral virtue but an ontological one; it is the awareness of the place of my ego…that I am a situated being…\textsuperscript{19}

An awareness that each of us is a situated being, bound by historical-cultural-linguistic particularities, creates a sense of humility about the veracity of our religious doctrines and claims to truth, which is a significant provision for learning. Being able to admit the finite and limited means in which the Ultimate Reality (e.g., God, Truth, the Absolute, the Sacred, the Divine) has

\textsuperscript{17} Swidler, “What Is Dialogue?”
been grasped, received, and expressed in oneself and one’s own tradition is an important condition for successful dialogue.

2) Additionally, in interreligious relations there has often been experienced a tension or unstable balance between openness to the other and commitment to one’s own religious worldview.20 This delicate equilibrium is important because neither side of the issue can be dispensed. In order to learn from the other one must necessarily be receptive to the other’s beliefs, ideas, and practices. At the same time, for one to learn from the other one must be oneself, maintaining a distinct and differentiated religious perspective from the other and her/his religion. This does not mean that dialogical interlocutors may not share any cultural or religious elements prior to or during the engagement, and it does not preclude the actual possibility of conversion as a result of the dialogue. It does suggest that, as one encounters the other, one begins within the context of some kind of religious commitment, which includes a particular heritage of belief and practice (including that of atheism, agnosticism, humanism, etc.).21 Religious commitment does not of necessity entail a complete acceptance of every single element of the tradition, but rather assumes recognition of one’s particular religious worldview and belief system and willingness to affirm its validity in dialogue with persons having different worldviews and belief systems.22

It is commitment to a religious worldview which differentiates between interreligious dialogue and the more general interpersonal dialogue. Without dedication to a particular religion or tradition of faith and practice, one looses the enrichment that comes from participating deeply in an enduring heritage of wisdom and shared experience. To use the metaphor of a journey, commitment provides the foundational point of departure from which one engages a truly religious other in the dialogical voyage. Religious commitment also allows for a place from which one returns after having encountered the other, a context in which the experiences and

insights realized in dialogue may be critically assessed and ultimately applied in one’s home community as well as the wider religious heritage.23

3) Another significant condition of interreligious dialogue is being able to recognize and appreciate otherness. One’s interlocutor in dialogical exchange is a real other, a subject differentiated from oneself in relationship. In order for authentic dialogue to take place, the other must not be a projected other, where one casts one’s own religious beliefs, worldview, and/or value system onto the conversation partner, but must be viewed and understood as a genuine other constituting real difference.24 As previously mentioned, without this differentiation there could be no valid exchange, for this requires relationality between distinct subjects. The recognition of the otherness of the other allows the other worldview the appropriate respect as a unique and special religious expression of humanity. Moreover, if this true difference and otherness is not affirmed then there is no possibility of growth in learning and understanding, since this goal necessitates the process of the unfamiliar and unknown (the other person, beliefs, practices, etc.) becoming at least partially or tentatively familiar and known.25

This begs the question: Is it possible to actually understand the other as other? While some have argued for the utter incommensurability and unintelligibility between cultures, languages, and religions,26 interreligious dialogue as a process of learning and exchange certainly does not make sense without an affirmation of the prospect of at least some kind of understanding of the other in the encounter. Though full or “objective” understanding of the religious other is not likely possible (via the postmodern critique of absoluteness and certainty) or desirable (since this would strip the other of her/his uniqueness), an incomplete, imperfect, and tentative type of understanding is necessary. Otherwise, the point of dialogue is dispelled.

24 David Tracy, Dialogue With the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Press, 1990), 29-30, 41-44.
Cornille aptly and instructively employs the term “empathy” to describe the understanding of the other as other in dialogue:

[Empathy] consists of a transposition into the religious life of the other by identifying with the worldview, the belief system, and the ritual practices of the other in order to resonate with the spiritual impact of particular teachings on the life of a believer.27

That is, while preserving the true otherness of the other, one is able to learn from and understand the other by virtue of an empathic imagination of her/his religious experience. Rather than projecting one’s religious beliefs and practices onto the other, one opens oneself up to the other through adapting an attitude of compassion, “feeling/experiencing with” the other her/his religious beliefs and practices while still remaining differentiated as oneself.

4) Dialogue also entails the idea that the teachings and practices of the other and their religion are somehow related to and relevant for oneself and one’s own religion. A basic condition for interfaith relations is a fundamental sense of commonality, connection, and solidarity among religious traditions. This is not a conception of religious identity or synchronicity, i.e. that all religions are essentially or ultimately one and the same. Rather, it is the awareness that there must be some basis of coming together in order for interreligious dialogue to be possible. Cornille asserts,

Any notion of the radical singularity or the fundamental incomparability of religions would render dialogue superfluous, if not impossible. Interreligious dialogue thus presupposes a conviction that, in spite of important and ineradicable differences in belief and practices, religions may find one another in a common ground.28

The common ground between oneself and another from a different tradition may be a shared historical past (e.g., Abrahamic origin of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) or perhaps a concrete joint goal or purpose (e.g., education and human rights promotion in local community).

Nonetheless, some belief in the connection and relatedness of religions is requisite to make dialogue feasible and meaningful.

27 Cornille, *Im-possibility*, 175.
28 Ibid, 95.
Interreligious dialogue is amenable to the current postmodern context because it includes and embraces particularity and relationality, two primary elements of this paradigm. Dialogical learning involves doctrinal and epistemic humility and commitment to a certain tradition, which is an acceptance of the finitude and limitation of oneself and one’s religion as an individual, particular religious expression bound by a historical-cultural-linguistic context. It also entails appreciating the otherness of the other and the interconnection of religions, which is a robust endorsement of relationality between differentiated, particular others as the most acceptable and convincing way of conceiving reality.

Dialogue addresses subjectivism and relativism by positing the possibility of inter-subjectivity. While there is no claim to absolute certainty or objective consideration of the other in dialogue, there is the affirmation that, through an empathic inter-subjective/relational exchange between religious others, a genuine growth in learning and understanding takes place when basic, vital conditions are present. That is, these conditions of humility, religious commitment, affirmation of otherness, and interconnection among religions all imply an exclusion of absolute claims or knowledge about truth and reality, and rather suggest that it is by virtue of relationship between differentiated yet interdependent subjects that any understanding about truth and reality is achievable. Dialogical inter-subjectivity could be viewed as a middle ground between objectivity/absolutism and subjectivity/relativism. Although dialogue does acknowledge a plurality of particular individuals and the impossibility of certain and objective knowledge, over and against extreme subjectivist relativism dialogue does not see understanding as impossible, but rather inter-relational.

TRANSFORMATIVE POSSIBILITIES OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

After having highlighted the fundamental aim and characteristic conditions of interreligious dialogue as well as dialogue’s ability to navigate through the postmodern critiques of subjectivism and relativism, it is important to deal with the creative possibilities that may be engendered by engaging in conversation with the religious other. Using the influential work of

The purpose and important conditions of interreligious dialogue are the guiding factors in forming the maximum potential for creative, transformative outcomes. That is, whenever the aim is centered on learning and gaining insight and the qualities of humility, religious commitment, accepting the other as truly other, and the interconnection of religions are present in some discernible form, then we may begin to more confidently claim the greatest level of success or fruitfulness occurring in and coming from interreligious relationships. Indeed, there is no incontrovertible litmus test for identifying, investigating, and analyzing the “productivity” of interfaith encounters. However, numerous experienced practitioners and theorists recognize the purpose and characteristics of dialogue previously examined (though often articulated in different ways and with varying emphases) and point to the real potential for mutual transformation when these qualities exist in the dialogical relationship.29

Using hermeneutics to establish a philosophical grounding for interreligious dialogue is predicated on the notion of interpretation being a fundamental category not only of understanding written scriptures but also of any text, image, symbol, word, sound, or person.30 In the case of interreligious dialogue, one engages in the interpretation of another human individual and thus her/his religious worldview. That is, the underlying principles of interpreting a written text are applicable to inter-subjective conversational encounters between persons.31

Of the many philosophical approaches to investigating interpretation and understanding in Western thought, the Gadamerian hermeneutical model of dialogue is quite persuasive. For Gadamer, understanding occurs through engaging in conversation with another person, text,


31 See especially Tracy, Analogical, 68.
symbol, etc. During this encounter with the other, one is grasped by or taken into the process of exchange – the back-and-forth, to-and-fro, question-and-answer movement. That is, one follows and participates in the logic of the subject matter in the question-and-answer interchange between oneself and the other.32

Gadamer employs a particular metaphor to illustrate this interpretive process. Dialogue is a type of game.33 Just as with any other type of game, the interaction is not determined or controlled by the subjective awareness of the players. Indeed, a player who attempts to rule or direct the game solely according to her/his own self-consciousness ultimately disintegrates the communal, inter-subjective nature of the game.34 The players give themselves (their intention and awareness) over to the playing or back-and-forth activity of the game. In this sense, Gadamer speaks of the players being played by the game, which is a way of describing the feeling of a loss of self-consciousness or the attainment of self-transcendence when immersed in the shared participation of play. Perhaps in colloquial terms, we might refer to this experience as being “in the moment,” “in the zone,” “in the groove,” or “in the flow.”35

Gadamer’s point is that when one enters into dialogue with another, becomes present with the other, and consciously allows oneself to be grasped by the back-and-forth, question-and-answer movement of the conversation, an experience of transcending one’s usual, normal consciousness may emerge. According to this hermeneutical framework, dialogue allows for a resulting experience of a dialogical self, where oneself exists in mutually informing, interdependent, inter-subjective relationship with a real, not projected, other. In other words, one experiences self-transcendence through participating in the shared world created and formed by the conversational process between oneself and one’s dialogue partner.

For Gadamer, dialogue provides the interpretive context for the production of understanding. Therefore, understanding is described as an event where truth and meaning

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34 Ibid. Also see David Tracy’s exposition of Gadamer concerning the analogy of the game, Tracy, *Analogical*, 105-110.
35 In positive psychology, the concept of “flow” has been proposed as a mental state of operation where someone is immersed in a feeling of focus, full involvement, and total participation in an activity. See Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper&Row, 1990).
emerge from the dynamic interface of dialogue. As an event, the understanding that comes through dialogue is not something controlled or determined by one’s own self-consciousness or intention, but is rather something that happens or occurs to oneself as a realized experience. When one understands, one undergoes an experience of realization or awakening, a glimpse of something that cannot but be called truth. Following Heidegger’s conception of truth as *aletheia*, truth is not so much the “correctness” of a statement insofar as it represents some aspect of reality as it is fundamentally an “unconcealment” or “uncovering” of a world of meaning to the interpreter. Therefore, for Gadamer, understanding comes about through dialogue as an event, which is a realized experience of the disclosure of truth and meaning for the interpreter/dialoguer.

The creative possibility cultivated in interreligious dialogue is hermeneutically grounded in this Gadamerian model of *dialogue producing understanding as an experiential event of truth-manifestation* and may be encapsulated in a word – transformation. The back-and-forth, question-and-answer with the religious other creates an experience where new insight of truth and meaning is disclosed or “made known,” and where one’s pre-encounter worldview is confronted by the communicated worldview of the other, which introduces and integrates new elements into one’s horizon of understanding. Transformation in dialogue is thus an influential change prompted by the encounter with otherness and the experience of truth-disclosure. This change involves the enhancement of meaning, expansion of awareness, deepening of insight and appreciation of the other and her/his faith tradition.

CONCLUSION

During the course of this essay the foundational background of the interfaith movement, the emerging paradigm shift to epistemological relationality, and the important aim and conditions of interreligious dialogue have been explicated. Arguing that dialogue is a viable and productive response to the increasingly prominent postmodern context of plurality and ambiguity, a claim is made for creative, transformative possibilities being present in

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interreligious dialogue. The potential for transformation is grounded in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics which views dialogue as that process of question-and-answer that allows for the event of understanding as a realized experience of the uncovering, disclosing of truth and meaning.

In our current postmodern context of plurality and diversity of religious perspectives, interreligious dialogue may be seen as an important forum for facilitating mutual, reciprocal learning about self and other and ultimately transformation into an increased understanding and experience of truth and meaning.

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