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The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue
Edited by Catherine Cornille
The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue

Edited by

Catherine Cornille
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Since the middle of the twentieth century the notion of dialogue has become increasingly common in describing or prescribing the proper relationship between religions. Rather than competing with one another over territories, converts or claims, religions have generally come to adopt a more conciliatory and constructive attitude toward one another, collaborating in social projects and exchanging views on common religious questions. Centers for interreligious dialogue have emerged in different parts of the world, and high-profile international meetings have been organized, bringing together leaders and/or scholars from any number of religious traditions to engage in mutually respectful conversation about various religious topics. This has led in turn to increased reflection on the nature of inter-religious dialogue and on its many forms and manifestations.

The term dialogue tends to be used to cover a wide range of engagements between religious traditions, from daily interaction between believers living in the same neighborhoods to organized discussions and debates between expert scholars, and from formal or casual exchanges between spiritual or institutional leaders to inter-religious activism around social issues. The goals of particular dialogues may differ, from peaceful coexistence to social change, and from mutual understanding to actual religious growth. But the common denominator in all these forms of inter-religious engagement is mutual respect and openness to the possibility of learning from the other. The category of inter-religious dialogue may then be used to refer to any form or degree of constructive engagement between religious traditions.

In this, dialogue between religions may be distinguished from other types of inter-religious engagement that lack an actively constructive element, such as the neutral study of religion, or more traditional apologetics. It differs from religious studies approaches in that participants engage one another from a faith position, and in that the goal of dialogue lies not only in mutual understanding, but also in the pursuit of truth and of personal and religious growth. Such growth may take the form of deeper self-understanding or of appropriating new insights and practices from the other religion. It may also lead to confession and repair of past misdeeds committed against the other, or to the actual prevention of violent conflict.
While dialogue is often thought of as the peaceful and amicable exchange of views, it also often entails argument and fierce debate. If true to their convictions, believers will naturally wish to witness not only to the contents, but also to the truth of their faith. And since no two religions are ever perfectly compatible, the exchange and discussion of religious views cannot but involve some level of disagreement and some measure of defense of the plausibility of one’s own beliefs and practices. Apologetics may thus form part of advanced forms of dialogue. However, while classical apologetics is mainly oriented toward defeating the other, dialogue also involves openness and receptivity to the witness of the other. As such, dialogue between religions involves a delicate and often difficult balance between commitment to one’s own tradition and openness to the other.

The very possibility of dialogue between religious traditions signals, or perhaps requires significant shifts in the self-understanding of religious traditions. While religions tend to be naturally convinced of the superior, if not exclusive truth of their own teachings, dialogue presupposes some degree of humility about one’s own conception of truth and a certain receptivity, even hospitality to the truth of the other. The attitudes of humility and hospitality reinforce one another and have come to affect most religious traditions as these have come to terms with the reality of religious diversity. Direct encounter with and deeper knowledge of the teachings and practices of other religions tends to preclude an easy dismissal of their validity and truth. And the very conception of religious truth has undergone a significant paradigm shift, as Leonard Swidler points out in his contribution to this volume. While most religions have come to a basic recognition and acceptance of the reality of religious plurality, degrees of religious tolerance and openness toward the religious other continue to vary, not only between religious traditions but also within them. As such, inter-religious dialogue remains a challenge for religious traditions, often requiring considerable hermeneutical effort and the retrieval of internal textual or traditional resources to facilitate such constructive exchange.

While the systematic effort to bring people from different religions into dialogue with one another may be a relatively recent phenomenon, the history of religions is replete with examples of more or less constructive engagement between religions. The articles in this volume give ample testimony to this fact. Some form of dialogue already takes place whenever a new religion attempts to define its own identity through a process of acceptance, rejection and reinterpretation of the parent religion or religions. While this may be seen to lack the reciprocity of genuine dialogue, the emergence of a new offshoot religion often challenges the parent religion to redefine its own teachings or sharpen its own beliefs. The same process occurs when religions move from one cultural context to another and tend to naturally borrow teachings and practices from the traditional religion of the culture. The processes of appropriation and reinterpretation of teachings and practices of other religions which takes place in the process of acculturation may be regarded as a form of implicit dialogue. In addition to these forms of unintentional dialogue and unavoidable engagement of other religions, one may also find isolated historical examples of more conscious attempts at dialogue and debate between religions. While often serving political or social interests, such dialogues do involve peaceful exchanges of views and attempts
at adjudicating the truth of these views in fairly transparent ways. Some of the historical dialogues discussed in this volume (e.g. the Buddhist–Hindu dialogue) in fact display a level of reflectivity about dialogue itself rarely encountered even in modern instances. Indeed, though dialogue is often thought of as a modern phenomenon and the relationship between religions as evolving toward greater openness, some contributions also suggest the opposite movement, from original intimacy and mutuality to growing animosity. Not only does religious self-understanding change in often unpredictable ways, but religions are also commonly used to bolster nationalistic and ethnocentric ideologies. As such, history provides not only examples of past dialogue, but also food for further dialogue.

This Companion focuses on the phenomenon of inter-religious dialogue in general and in concrete cases. The first part of the volume deals with focal topics in inter-religious dialogue. These topics bring to the fore some of the areas which have been particularly relevant in the pursuit and performance of inter-religious dialogue, as well as some critical issues arising from that dialogue. Some contributions deal with topics internal to the dialogue (comparative theology, scriptural reasoning, interstitial theology, etc.) while others deal with the relationship between of dialogue and broader social issues.

We start with a discussion of the history of inter-religious dialogue by Leonard Swidler, himself one of the pioneers of such dialogue in the West. This is followed by a closer exploration of the fundamental conditions for a constructive dialogue between religions. Monastics from different religions have played a crucial role in the development of inter-religious dialogue, not only in exemplifying openness and hospitality toward the religious other, but also in pointing to a deeper level of spiritual connection from which all actual dialogue may spring. One of the main architects and advocates of intermonastic dialogue, Pierre de Béthune, offers a thorough discussion of the background, the principles and the fruits of this dialogue.

Among scriptural traditions, inter-religious dialogue has often taken the form of the reading of sacred texts of another tradition. This may happen in solitary form, as a scholar of one tradition reads and engages in theological reflection on a text of another. But it may also happen in more communal fashion, as scholars from different religious traditions enter into dialogue on the meaning of a particular text. The first type of dialogue has been called comparative theology, and the latter scriptural reasoning. Francis Clooney, who is a pioneer and strong proponent of comparative theology, discusses the nature of this discipline and its relation to inter-religious dialogue. Marianne Moyaert offers an overview of the background, principles and practices of scriptural reasoning together with some critical reflections.

While dialogue is generally understood as verbal exchange, the act of participating in the rituals of another religion or of worshipping together also constitutes a form of dialogue. In his article, Michael Amaladoss deals with various types of inter-religious worship as practiced mainly in India, while also pointing to some of the contested issues in this dialogue. Art represents another powerful non-verbal vehicle for inter-religious exchange. Mary Anderson draws some beautifully evocative connections between the
artistic relationship to the world and the openness, empathy and receptivity required for genuine dialogue between religions.

Among the different religious or theological innovations spawned by inter-religious dialogue, one of the most radical or extreme is that of interstitial theology. Tinu Ruparell, himself one of its vocal proponents, discusses the philosophical foundations and religious justifications of this type of theology which he defines as “the construction of hybrid perspectives for continuing the conversation between religions in an open and constructive way.”

The constructive dimension of inter-religious dialogue may involve direct learning from the insights and practices of another religion. But it may also entail collaboration between religions to bring about social change, either through the prevention of conflict (religious or other) or through the building of a more just society, drawing from the resources and the visions of different religions. Paul Knitter, one of the foremost advocates of inter-religious dialogue, offers an impassioned argument for the necessary interconnection between inter-religious dialogue and social action. Focusing specifically on the role of inter-religious dialogue in peace building, Ayse Kadayiftci-Orellana discusses the various ways in which collaboration between religions may help prevent war and build a more sustainable peace.

One of the critical questions in inter-religious dialogue is that of women’s participation. While women have played and continue to play a crucial role in many forms of informal dialogue, they are rarely at the center of the more formal and institutional dialogues between religions. Jeannine Hill-Fletcher sheds a critical light on this situation, pointing to the reasons why women’s voices may have been overlooked or ignored, and why they matter.

The second part of the book deals with case studies in inter-religious dialogue. These cases are, of course, far from exhaustive, or representative of all of the dialogues which have taken place in the course of history or which are taking place today. They do, however, offer a sample of the dialogues which are taking place in different parts of the world and between different types of religions: old and new, large and small, scriptural and oral, ethnic and universalistic, theistic and nontheistic. Each of the case studies deals variously with the history of a particular dialogue, important thinkers and ideas, contemporary developments and/or future challenges. Some of the dialogues discussed in this volume have a very long history, while others are fairly new. Some are enmeshed in deep-seated social and political tensions, while others take place on a purely speculative and theological level. This diversity is reflected in the different approaches and contents of the particular case studies. Some offer an overview of the history of a particular dialogue, while other focus primarily on the contemporary engagement between two religions. One contribution even engages in actual live dialogue on a topic central to Judaism and Confucianism.

Most of the authors of the case studies approach the dialogue mainly from the perspective of one or the other religion, and even from the perspective of a particular school or tradition within a certain religion. This is inevitably the case, as most of the authors are themselves active participants in the dialogue, engaging the other religion constructively from their own religious perspective. Robert Millet, for example, is one
of the first Mormons to engage with Evangelical Christians, and Anant Rambachan has become one of the favorite Hindu dialogue partners for Christians, just as Daniel Madigan and John Berthrong are often called upon to represent Christianity in the dialogue with, respectively, Islam and Confucianism. Each of these authors has a profound knowledge of and sympathy for the other religion, and for the other’s perspective on the dialogue. But one must keep in mind that the essay on the Christian–Buddhist dialogue that appears here would have been quite different if it had been written by a Buddhist, or for that matter by a Roman Catholic Christian, while a Muslim author might have shed a different light or taken a different approach to the Jewish–Muslim dialogue. A notable exception to the one-sidedness of the approaches to dialogue is the article on the Confucian–Jewish dialogue, which was co-authored by a Jewish scholar of Confucianism and a Confucian scholar of Judaism. Some authors do display a remarkable capacity to approach the dialogue “from the middle” between the two traditions, either because they are somewhat removed from either tradition, or, on the contrary, because they have come to identify with both.

The case studies are arranged roughly in order of antiquity, or according to the length of history of their engagement. As might be expected, the oldest dialogues are mostly between religions with some family relationship: Hinduism and Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity, Christianity and Islam. But there are also unrelated religions with a long tradition of mutual engagement: Shinto and Buddhism, or Hinduism and Islam. Until the twentieth century, engagement between religions was largely determined by physical proximity and the vicissitudes of territorial expansion. In the contemporary globalized context, however, dialogues may take place between any two or more religions, across territorial and ideological boundaries. The antiquity of a dialogue is of course no guarantee for its continuity or success. Relationships between religions change, often due to political and social factors, and religions which were once quite intimate (such as Shintoism and Buddhism) may grow apart, while religions with scant historical connection (such as Buddhism and Christianity) may come to engage in very active and productive dialogue. Dialogue is in fact often easier between religions with little or no family relationship, since there is less need to come to terms with directly opposing views or interpretations, and with a history of mutual rejection. As such, the dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism is considerably less contentious and encumbered than the dialogue between Christianity and Islam. However, as the fascination with novelty and difference wanes and as the burden of history is somewhat lifted, one may expect similar challenges and advances in both types of dialogue.

Relative to the long history of religions, the experience of genuine dialogue or constructive engagement between religions is still in fact in its infancy. While much may be learned from the history of encounter between two religions and from the evidence of conscious or unconscious borrowing, dialogue still constitutes for most religions a future promise, rather than a past accomplishment. The possibilities for inter-religious dialogue are virtually infinite, not only in terms of possible dialogue partners, but also in terms of unending and unpredictable possibility for growth and change. There are undoubtedly limits to the constructive potential of any dialogue between particular religions. But few, if any of the dialogues discussed in this volume have reached those
limits. As such, it cannot represent a summary or an afterword to the history of inter-religious dialogue, so much as a preamble.

In closing, I wish to thank each and every scholar who has contributed to this volume. The task of writing a history of a particular dialogue was in many cases daunting and the authors have accepted the challenge with generosity and grace. Though every dialogue is ongoing and constantly changing, each article represents an invaluable record of certain important facts, an account of their emergence and their meaning, and an important contribution to scholarship on inter-religious dialogue. I also want to thank Glenn Willis for his expert help in editing this collection. This volume may be regarded as a companion to a series of books I have recently edited on various critical topics in inter-religious dialogue, each approached by scholars from different religious traditions. Together they point to the real challenges, the wide range of possibilities, the important achievements, and the enduring promise of genuine dialogue between religions.

Note

PART I

Focal Topics
The History of Inter-Religious Dialogue

Leonard Swidler

The world has always needed dialogue, but after the 1989 “Fall of the Wall,” and even more after 9/11, the world increasingly realizes that it needs dialogue. At the heart of dialogue is inter-religious dialogue, because religion is the most comprehensive of all the human “disciplines”: “an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly” (Swidler and Mojzes 2000). Until the slow emergence of inter-religious dialogue out of Modernity, out of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment of the West, religion was also the most absolutist, exclusivist of all the disciplines. Thus, dialogue – fundamentally meaning “I can learn from you” – is a dagger pointed at the heart of absolutist religion/ideology. But, let’s start briefly at the beginning.

As long as there has been Homo sapiens sapiens (perhaps since 70,000 BCE.) there have been attempts – however meager – to explain “the ultimate meaning of life and how to live accordingly”: religions. When small groups of humans gathered into large enough collectivities to form cities, each of these civilizations had at its heart a religion which both shaped and expressed that civilization. All of these ancient religions were “primary religions,” that is, were coterminous with the civilization or “state”; for instance, all members of the Israelite “nation,” and only they, were devotees of the Israelite religion.

That began to change drastically in the four ancient civilizations of Greece, Israel, India, China during the Axial Age (800–200 BCE). A shift occurred whereby some individuals began to identify no longer primarily with the collective, but with the personal conscience, to focus no longer primarily on the exterior, but on the interior. These religions increasingly tended to claim not just particularist but universal validity; that is, not just for, for instance, Athenians, but for all humans – which gave rise to religious absolutism. Still, the link between the state and religion remained strong, for as the state expanded the religion also tended to expand; and conquered peoples tended eventually to adopt the religion of the victors. For example, as the Christian, or later Muslim, armies were victorious, so too Christianity and Islam spread. Hence, the
universalist claims of Axial and post-Axial religions led to at times peaceful, but also bellicose encounters among the various religions, with the latter by far dominating. There were occasional leading devotees of such religions who stand out as models of irenicism, like Ashoka the Great (304–232 BCE), the quasi-Buddhist Emperor of India, St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226 CE), Akbar the Great, Muslim Emperor of India (1542–1605 CE). Their peaceful impacts on inter-religious relations were, however, limited, geographically and in other ways, and inter-religious encounters during the subsequent age of European exploration and colonization were marked primarily by proselytization.

This slowly began to change, though at first not noticeably, with the rise of Modernity and the Enlightenment, which was characterized by freedom, reason, history, and later dialogue (Swidler 2011). The Enlightenment put forth a breakthrough thesis: at the heart of being human is freedom and rationality, and to that was added by the Late Enlightenment (German scholars write of die Spät Aufklärung) a sense of history and dynamism. Embedded in the clarion call written in 1776 in Philadelphia (Greek: Brotherly/Sisterly Love), “All men are created equal” was the soft whisper, “therefore dialogue.” It became a public voice at the inter-religious encounter of the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago.

The Christian Ecumenical Movement

Before directing our attention to the turning point of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, I would like to draw attention to a slightly later development that provided a solid underpinning for the expansion of inter-religious dialogue subsequent to the parliament. I am referring to the launching of the Christian Ecumenical Movement in 1910 in Edinburgh.

As a delegate to the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Bishop Charles H. Brent, a Missionary Episcopal Bishop in the Philippines, felt there was a need to discuss the questions of faith and ecclesiastical order deliberately excluded from the conference. Speaking from the floor, he announced his intention to found an organization for that purpose (eventually the Movement for Faith and Order) (Michael 1958: 21). In the following fall, Bishop Brent addressed the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States, telling the members about the Edinburgh Conference and urging them to take the lead in founding a Conference on Faith and Order. As a consequence, a committee was appointed. The response was extraordinarily favorable throughout the United States and other parts of the world. Even the response of the Vatican was very sympathetic, though indefinite. However, the plans were almost completely disrupted by the outbreak of the First World War (Sasse 1929: 5). Immediately after the war, in the spring of 1919, a deputation from the American Episcopal Church Commission left on a European trip in an attempt to contact the leaders of the Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, and a date for the first World Conference of the Movement for Faith and Order was set for August 3, 1927, when 394 representatives from 108 Protestant and Orthodox Churches met in Lausanne, Switzerland (Tatlow 1954: 409–419).
Almost simultaneously a parallel effort was playing out. The genesis of the second large ecumenical organization, the Movement for Life and Work, was intimately bound up with the First World War, and the World Alliance of Churches for Promoting International Friendship, which was launched by the Protestant Churches early in 1914 as war was looming. The leader of both the Alliance and the Movement for Life and Work was the Lutheran Archbishop of Uppsala, Nathan Söderblom. He maintained that a common organ of expression was necessary for the churches, and that its formation could not wait until they had achieved unity on matters of faith and order. This was shown by the helplessness of the churches during the crisis of the war. “We cannot afford to remain separated and in a state of unnecessary impotence caused by our separation, up to the time when we shall be truly united in faith and Church organization” (Söderblom 1923: 1). This Ecumenical Council would not encroach on the independence of the churches and would deal, not with matters of faith and order, but with social and international problems. As the planning committee of Life and Work expressed it in 1922, “Doctrine divides, but service unites” (Kalstroem: 540). The first international conference of Life and Work was held in Stockholm on August 19, 1925.

In the wake of these two huge ecumenical gatherings, the sentiment arose that they themselves needed an “ecumenical movement” to unify them. Plans were then eventually made to allow the second meetings of the two organizations to take place very near each other in time and place so that many delegates could attend both. This happened in the summer of 1937 in Oxford and Edinburgh. The two organizations each voted to merge, and joint committees were set up. The newly formed joint organization, named the World Council of Churches, was to have its first world conference in 1941, but, as in 1914, when the outbreak of war prevented the launch of the Movement for Faith and Order, so the formal coming into existence of the World Council of Churches was postponed by war; it had to wait until 1948, in Amsterdam.

Protestant leaders tried mightily to include the Catholic Church in their efforts toward Christian unity. However, the Pope’s own words in the early 1920s made it extremely clear that he had no intention of participating in ecumenical organizations. “Therefore, worthy brethren, it is clear why this Apostolic See never allows its own members to take part in the conferences of non-Catholic Christians. One may foster the reunion of Christians only insofar as one fosters the return of those standing outside to the one true Church from which they once unfortunately separated themselves” (Pius XI 1928: 58). Similar attitudes persisted in the Vatican for the next 40 years, repeatedly forbidding Catholic participation in dialogue (e.g., 1928 Mortalium animos; 1948 Monitum; 1949 Instructio; 1954 barring of Catholics at the Evanston World Council of Churches World Assembly). Clearly, the repeated Vatican condemnations were actually in reaction to the rising Catholic interest and participation in ecumenical dialogue – most notably through the Una Sancta Movement, starting in Germany after World War I (1914–18), expanding under Nazi oppression, and becoming a popular movement after World War II (1935–45) (see Swidler, 1966).

Why spend so much time reviewing the intra-Christian ecumenical movement when laying out the development of inter-religious dialogue? Inter-religious dialogue as it is now understood in each of its three primary modes – that is, reaching out to learn from
other religions/ideologies more fully the meaning of life (Dialogue of the Head); joining
with the Other to make the world a better place in which to live (Dialogue of the Hands);
and an awe-filled embrace of the inner spirit and aesthetic expressions of the Other
(Dialogue of the Heart) — grew out of the Enlightenment West, former Christendom. It
is this magnetic lodestone that has been drawing the rest of the globe into its paradigm
shift. It first drew splintered Christianity into its orbit, moving it to a search for greater
unity in response to the ever-expanding intellectual challenge of the Enlightenment
and its spun-off new scholarly disciplines: scientific history, sociology, anthropology,
psychology. The growing Enlightenment moved on to begin to pull all the religions/
ideologies of the world into its growing “Field of Force,” eventually ushering in by the
latter part of the twentieth century the Age of Global Dialogue. Hence, it is vital to see
some of the historical context whence this incredible world-changing global force
derived.

The Move to Dialogue with Other Religions

As noted above, we can date the “public” launching of modern inter-religious dialogue
to the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago (Barrows 1893). It was by
far the most prominent gathering at the Columbian World Exhibition celebrating the
400th anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of America. What is stated about the par-
liament’s importance is accurate: “Today it is recognized as the occasion of the birth
of formal inter-religious dialogue worldwide.”¹ The “trigger” of the positive explosion
of inter-religious dialogue at the parliament was provided by the Indian Hindu Swami
Vivekananda. He began his address: “‘Sisters and brothers of America!’ To these words
he got a standing ovation from a crowd of seven thousand, which lasted for two
minutes” (Bhuyan 2005: 5). Though Vivekananda was a devotee of a particular branch
of Hinduism (Advaita Vedanta), he was not on a conversion trip to America. His aim
clearly was dialogic in the modern sense: “‘I do not come,’ said Swamiji on one occasion
in America, ‘to convert you to a new belief. I want you to keep your own belief; I want
to make the Methodist a better Methodist; the Presbyterian a better Presbyterian; the
Unitarian a better Unitarian. I want to teach you to live the truth, to reveal the light
within your own soul’” (Vivekananda). A number of other well-known religious leaders
also participated in the parliament, including Virchand Gandhi, a Jain scholar from
India, Anagarika Dharmapala from Sri Lanka representing Theravada Buddhism, and
D.T. Suzuki from Japan representing Zen Buddhism. They and many other religious
teachers and leaders toured or taught in the West for years, spreading their teachings,
gaining new followers in some instances, and promoting a new openness to other
religions.

The fin de siècle parliament, massively reinforced by the subsequent inflow of the
intra-Christian Ecumenical Movement at the beginning of the new century described
earlier, opened the dam for the dialogue among the religions of the world. From this
point forward only the outstanding events that most recognize as major markers in the
development of inter-religious dialogue can be, albeit all too briefly, discussed. Since, as
it happened, I personally “stumbled” into the “dialogue” in the middle of the twentieth
century and was carried along with the expanding dialogic flood tide, I will now largely use my own direct experience as the “thread” with which to follow developments in inter-religious dialogue from the middle of the last century onward.

The first half of the twentieth century had seen a huge global Armageddon conflict in two stages referred to as the First and Second World Wars. Following the Second World War, with the beginning of the “Long Peace,” (Pinker 2011) most Protestant and Orthodox Churches were finally able to gather together in the World Council of Churches in 1948. However, as noted above, the great majority of Christians – Catholics – remained mired in isolation through the next decade and a half. Individual Catholic thinkers, and larger efforts like the German Una Sancta movement, nevertheless persisted against Vatican condemnations and silencings. Then suddenly, seemingly miraculously, the elderly Cardinal Angelo Roncalli was elected as a “safe interim” pope, (Saint) John XXIII. Shortly after his installation he called together the Cardinals in Rome and announced “I had a dream” (before Martin Luther King) in which he went around the Vatican throwing open the windows. He announced that he was calling a new Ecumenical Council (Vatican II) to follow the “signs of the times,” as he put it, to “bring the Catholic Church up to date (aggiornamento)” so it could engage in dialogue with the world.

Vatican Council II (1962–65) ushered in a revolution in the literal sense; it turned things around in many areas, including Catholic relations with non-Catholics. At the Council a “Declaration on Religious Liberty” (Dignitatis humanae) was passed, solemnly affirming that religious liberty was a central part of Catholic teaching (after it had been formally condemned by Pope Gregory XVI in 1832, and Pope Pius IX in 1864, as delirium, “madness”). Secondly, a “Decree on Ecumenism” (Unitatis reintegratio) was passed committing all Catholics to engage in dialogue: “Exhorting all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism.” Not being content with this exhortation, the Catholic bishops went on to say that, “in ecumenical work, [all] Catholics must . . . make the first approaches toward them [non-Catholics].” In case there were some opaque minds or recalcitrant wills out there, the bishops once more made it ringingly clear that ecumenical dialogue “involves the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone, according to the talent of each” (Article 5). Thirdly, all the Catholic bishops of the world, including the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, passed a “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (Nostra Aetate) in which the Catholic Church “reflects at the outset what humans have in common and what tends to promote fellowship among them. All humans form but one community.”

The third paragraph of Nostra aetate expressed with such clarity the human search for meaning that it merits citation in full here:

Humans look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence. The problems that weigh heavily on the hearts of humans are the same today as in the ages past. What is the human? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behavior, and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate, and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? What happens at death? What is judgment? What follows death? And finally, what is the ultimate mystery, beyond human explanation,
which embraces our entire existence, from which we take our origin and toward which we tend?

The Declaration then drew positive practical conclusions from these questions:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for their manner of life and conduct, their precepts and doctrines... The Church therefore urges its members to enter with prudence and charity into dialogue and collaboration with members of other religions... preserving and encouraging the moral truths found among non-Christians, as well as their social life and culture.

Further, the Catholic Church immediately acted on these words by setting up in the Vatican – and requiring every national conference of bishops around the world, and indeed, every diocese to set up – secretariats for dialogue with 1) other Christian Churches and the Jews, 2) non-Christian religions, and 3) non-believers. In 1964, even before the close of the Vatican II Council, I myself was invited to be a participant in the US Catholic-Reformed & Presbyterian Dialogue, and a little later to be a member of the US Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Dialogue with the Jews.

During the Council in 1964 Pope Paul VI in his first encyclical made it clear that:

dialogue is demanded nowadays. . . . It is demanded by the dynamic course of action which is changing the face of modern society. It is demanded by the pluralism of society, and by the maturity man has reached in this day and age. Be he religious or not, his secular education has enabled him to think and speak, and to conduct a dialogue with dignity (Ecclesiastum suam, no. 78).

Following up on these extraordinary initiatives, shortly after the Council ended, the Vatican’s Secretariat for Dialogue with Non-believers wrote that even “doctrinal dialogue should be initiated with courage and sincerity, with the greatest freedom and with reverence.” It then went further to make a statement that is mind-jarring in its liberality:

Doctrinal discussion requires perceptiveness, both in honestly setting out one’s own opinion and in recognizing the truth everywhere, even if the truth demolishes one so that one is forced to reconsider one’s own position, in theory and in practice, at least in part. . . . [I]n discussion the truth will prevail by no other means than by the truth itself. Therefore, the liberty of the participants must be ensured by law and reverenced in practice. All Christians should do their best to promote dialogue between men of every class as a duty of fraternal charity suited to our progressive and adult age. . . . The willingness to engage in dialogue is the measure and the strength of that general renewal which must be carried out in the Church. (Humanae personae dignitatem II.2)

This full-bore entrance of the Catholic Church into dialogue exponentially increased the involvement of all the other Christian Churches as well as the Jews. Every Church either expanded or created new agencies to foster dialogue.
The pages of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (JES) serve as an excellent bellwether marking the progress of the Interreligious Dialogue Movement. It was in the middle of Vatican II (1964) that my wife Arlene Anderson Swidler and I launched her idea, JES, a scholarly periodical devoted to religious dialogue. The original subtitle of the journal was “Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox,” but as soon as its second year we dropped it and took on our first non-Christian Associate Editor, Rabbi Arthur Gilbert. In the next three years JES continued to expand the dialogue (adding Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist . . . Associate Editors) so that the initial dialogue among Christians quickly spread to dialogue among all religions and beyond to all ideologies, cultures, and societal institutions.

Thus, what I had started to study as a graduate student in the 1950s – the dialogue between Catholics and Protestants – naturally moved on to Jewish–Christian dialogue, then Jewish–Christian–Muslim dialogue, and further to dialogue with Hinduism, Buddhism . . . and even Marxism. One of the new endeavors was the launching in the 1980s of the “Third Search for the Historical Jesus” among Christian and Jewish scholars (Swidler 1988; Swidler et al. 1990) followed by my involvement in the dialogue with Buddhism, (Swidler and Fernando, 1984) and then the launching of the Christian-Confucian Dialogue, June 8–15, 1988 (Swidler et al. 2005). Then, as part of this wave, some who were involved in individual dialogues began to reflect on “dialogue” itself. As this was happening the Berlin Wall came down in November, 1989, and the Soviet Union – which everybody (including the CIA and the KGB) thought would last well into the third millennium – teetered into oblivion.

Shortly afterward, Samuel Huntington argued that the world had settled back in to a “Clash of Civilizations” (Huntington 1993, 1996). He was right. There was/is a “clash of civilizations,” but that did not, and does not, describe the entire contemporary global scene. The world also dramatically began to move into the “Age of Global Dialogue,” which my work, as just one scholar, reflected. In that same time period, between 1990 and 1992, I published twelve books dealing with inter-religious dialogue (see the reference list).

In 2007, six years after Al Qaeda’s attack on America, Islam began to join global inter-religious dialogue in a massive way. This volte-face is analogous to the full-force entry of the Catholic Church into inter-religious dialogue beginning with Vatican II. Positive events suddenly began to erupt exponentially. This embrace of “global inter-religious dialogue” by Islam came first from 138 Muslim scholars and religious leaders from around the world on October 13, 2007, when they issued the amazing public letter “A Common Word Between Us,” inviting Christians leaders and scholars to join with them in Dialogue (see: www.acommonword.com).²

Then, onto the stage of world inter-religious dialogue strode King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, the heart-land of Islam! Having met Pope Benedict XVI in 2007, King Abdullah launched a World Conference on Dialogue with all the religions of the world in Spain, the land of the medieval “Golden Age” of inter-religious dialogue – Convivencia – on July 16–18, 2008 (www.saudi-us-relations.org/articles/2008/oi/080719-madrid-declaration.html). Further, King Abdullah supported, and even lent his name, to the establishment of the King Abdullah Center for the Study of Contemporary Islam and the Dialogue of Civilizations within Imam University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The very name sends a loud and clear message, that if you wish to be a serious Muslim in the
contemporary world, you need to be involved in dialogue with the other civilizations of the world. As an initial down-payment on that pledge, in 2009 the King Abdullah Center sent fourteen professors of Islamics from Imam University to study dialogue and democracy with the Dialogue Institute: inter-religious, intercultural, international (DI is the outreach arm of JES). In March, 2011, I lectured at Baku, Azerbaijan, Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Beirut, Lebanon, establishing new “Dialogue Institutes” in each place, as well as one in Kinshasa, Congo, as part of the expanding Dialogue Institutes Network – DIN – linked to DI/JES (http://institute.jesdialogue.org/programs/network).

There are, of course, now vastly many more instances of Muslim involvement in dialogue around the world. Contrast this with the fact that the ten Muslim scholars whom I and Gene Fisher were able to gather for the International Scholars Annual Trialogue (ISAT), starting in 1978 and still running, could not find any kindred-spirit Muslims worldwide, until 2007. This burgeoning of inter-religious, interideological dialogue around the world is engaging all the religions and ideologies. For example, the most famous of contemporary Confucian scholars, Weiming Tu, was professor at Harvard University for decades, until 2011, when he was brought to China’s equivalent, Beijing University, to start the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies, dedicated in a major way to the “Dialogue of Civilizations.” Even many agnostics and atheists are recognizing the importance of the exploding inter-religious dialogue and want to be part of it. Without a doubt, inter-religious, interideological dialogue has gained cultural, academic and religious relevance in a variety of ways. The plethora of bilateral dialogues among the religions of the world that has sprung up in the latter half of the twentieth century is reflected in manifold essays on these multiple dialogues in the rest of this volume, and doubtless will only increase exponentially.

Reasons for the Rise of Dialogue

How after thousands of millennia of absolutistic exclusivism – I alone possess all the truth, and anyone who disagrees with me obviously is mistaken – did large portions of humanity start to reverse its attitude and begin to think that they could learn from each other, particularly in that hypersensitive area of religion? Why did humanity begin in the last hundred years or so to reach out in dialogue?

Of course there are circumstantial reasons why dialogue is becoming more and more important today as world travel has been expanding massively. But there are also numerous internal reasons for this most radical shift. Thomas Kuhn revolutionized our understanding of the development of scientific thinking with his notion of the paradigm shift. He painstakingly showed that fundamental “paradigms” or “exemplary models” are the large thought-frames within which we place and interpret all observed data, and that scientific advancement inevitably brings about paradigm shifts – from geocentrism to heliocentrism, for example, or from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics, which are always vigorously resisted at first but finally prevail (Kuhn 1970).