

**THE USE OF THE WORD AND ITS LIMITS:
A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS PEACEMAKING**

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The use of the word as the principal means of peacemaking is ubiquitous in Western culture, at least among those who consider themselves peacemakers and diplomats. This is fundamentally flawed as far as an accurate picture of how, in fact, human beings reconcile and make peace, when they manage to do so.

Neither in practice nor in principle do words open us up to the vast range of possibilities in terms of how human beings change internally, or how they transform their relationships externally with adversaries. Western cultures, and in parallel form, Abrahamic religions of the West, tend to be wordy and textual, or believe themselves to be. They tend to over-emphasize the power of the word over the power of the deed, even though deed and ritual are actually deeply embedded in these religions. When it comes to peacemaking, the word becomes ubiquitous. We must analyze what religions have done till now with regard to the use of the word, and then make recommendations for the future.

This should not be misunderstood as a broadside against any use of the word. Nothing is categorical here but rather inclusive. It is an argument for what is missing, not an either/or formula. Furthermore, the use of the word is indispensable in all peacemaking when we come to the stage of negotiations, that is, once people find themselves willing and ready to come to “the table” in order to outline their differences and to agree on future arrangements.

There are subsets of the use of the word that include, for example, the use of the word for a written treaty, the use of the word in the context of dialogue, and the use of the word for study and training in conflict resolution. Dialogue is considered often to be the main or only means of conflict resolution. Many people use “dialogue” as the equivalent of peacemaking and conflict resolution. But this is a mistake.

Family conflict, inter-cultural conflict, and international conflict are closely related for a variety of reasons that I will not go into here. But allow me to engage in a family conflict analogy for a moment. Whenever we have a dispute with my very verbal four year old we remind her to use her words, especially when she is very upset and starts to throw things, or whine and cry. The truth is that, to the degree that one can get either enemies--or four year olds--to use their words one will move closer to peace and away from confrontation. But one cannot always rely on this. Most four-year olds happen to be less articulate than my daughter at this stage, and even she has many moods that go well beyond what she is capable of articulating. Most of us do.

Most enemies cannot or will not articulate their true feelings through the use of words in dialogue. Either it is beyond their present capacity, or what they really feel is too shameful. Examples of things too difficult to articulate may include deep envy, or shame at the collective humiliation of one's group, or an intense desire to humiliate, or to take revenge, or to see the enemy suffer.

This reluctance to articulate skews the words that do get used because they cloak much darker emotions at work. Furthermore, conducting a war is far more virile and honorable than articulating in words the feelings of envy for an enemy group, and therefore dialogic peacemaking is seen as weakness and defeat.

Nevertheless, religious words are used in a variety of circumstances, some of which have the advantage of moving intense emotions of hatred into a different mode of interaction. Often rational words and exchange are too hard, but healing words can be exchanged. One such example involves words or deeds that express reconciliation, regret, and apology. In the final stages of conflict processes many progressive people in the West envision reconciliation and apology.

Here again, however, the child parallels are instructive as to the complications of the use of the word. What comes naturally to my daughter after she has hurt us in some way is to saddle up next to us, looking for physical affection, or, alternatively, she explicitly acts as if nothing is wrong, hoping to go back to the old and good engagement.

But we are the ones who train her in such situations, several times a day it seems, to use the word 'sorry' before resuming good relations. She, however, naturally uses emotional acts, like affection, to reconcile, or symbolic actions, like a broad smile.

These symbolic acts embody my daughter's way of saying "I'm sorry". Which is superior, her nonverbal way or our verbal instructions? Are we training her for something superior, the use of the word for reconciliation, or are we ignoring her

natural capacities for reconciliation and failing to work with her natural means of ending a state of anger?

This is a central crux of conflict resolution analysis that remains unresolved. On one level, whatever comes naturally to a child, or to a culture or one class of people, might be preferred because, in essence, it works for them. But this path is very difficult to discern once we reach the infinite complexity of human diversity in multi-cultural contexts and complex international struggles. Even a single children's classroom or office may bring together many different orientations to reconciliation. Making generalizations about method becomes essentially unknowable due to the infinite diversity of reactions.

What becomes paramount, perhaps, is access to as wide a range of means of reconciliation as is possible, which includes both the word and the deed. The maximum range is necessary because the infinite complexity of human encounter across genders, religions, races and countries, requires great elasticity of engagement. This means that we must pursue dialogue as reconciliation, but with great humility and elasticity, ready and willing to combine it with or supplant it with other modes of reconciliation, especially in terms of deed, symbol, and emotional communication.

Even with my four-year old elasticity of method is preferable. We should listen as carefully to the way she reconciles as we expect her to listen to us. Naturally she needs in our society to learn the power and importance of negotiation, reconciliation and apology through the word, but we need to learn as well. Of course, we are the adults/teachers/models. But, without deferring completely to Rousseau's prejudice toward natural states, an accurate view of life acknowledges that children are our teachers also, because we have often become flawed as adults in our ability to truly listen to the other.

Missing the cues of how the adversary, the alienated other, is trying to engage us is a profoundly understudied phenomenon. It cuts to the heart of the persistence of many family and international conflicts. For example, if one party expects words and the other expects emotions, one expects symbols and the other deeds, one expects rational negotiation and the other expects apology, then we have the makings of conflict perpetuation, and even escalation, despite the intervention of verbally centered peacemakers who do not understand this problem. If the peacemakers do not train themselves to watch all nonverbal cues, to see the depths and the power of human symbolism, sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious, then they will miss the most important opportunities for transformation of relationships.

Religious encounters can be rich in the word, the deed, and the symbol. It is our choice, and it is essential that the costs and benefits of these options be understood by religious peacemakers.

The deed addresses the fundamental crux of conflict resolution, the relationship and struggle between justice and peace. Of course, deeds and symbols can go badly as well, and we must be open to the injuries sustained by either side when their gestures are ignored and/or not reciprocated. Clarification of these missed opportunities can and must go on through the use of the word, through dialogue. But correctives can also occur when enemies, made aware of these processes, make up for the failures by reciprocating nonverbal gestures, even when these do not come naturally to their own culture.

In addition to training religious diplomats and peacemakers in dialogue and negotiation, they must be trained in the detection of other gestures of reconciliation, actions and deeds that mean much more, and are trusted much more, than words. They must train themselves to detect deleterious processes of engagement that result from missed symbolic and non-verbal opportunities, and to invent strategies to consciously align or engage the culturally and religiously familiar conciliatory paths of adversary groups.

As I have stated, however, dialogue is only one subset of the potential of human reconciliation. It tends to favor those who are verbal and aggressive in group encounters.

It favors the better educated, and, in my training experience, a fixation on the exchange of the word tends to frustrate and disempower those who engage in reconciliation through gestures, symbols, emotions, and shared work. But it can and does help some to strategically work toward a more just and comprehensive peace.

Another complication of verbal exchange is that much of dialogue work— religious or secular--becomes overshadowed and even thwarted everywhere globally when the “official” dialogues take over. The latter, while necessary at some point, are deeply disempowering to the vast majority who have no say in the process. We should expect this counterproductive disempowerment as an element in any progress towards official peace, but learn how to help people counteract the deleterious effects. Whatever the value of dialogue, official or otherwise, it is only one part of peacemaking.

Furthermore, the ups and downs of the official dialogue process tend to hold everyone captive, imprisoned really.

Imagine yourself, for example, in a religious dialogue group. Around you are conditions of absolute misery. On top of this, there are others negotiating for you in “more important” venues of dialogue, whether you asked them to or not, bargaining with their interests in mind, without your input. How much value can you bring yourself to place on your own efforts to dialogue? How much of a price are you paying in your community for your dialogue work?

But what if, while official dialogue proceeds, what you are doing for reconciliation involves deeds, shared deeds between enemies? What if you are doing something concrete to improve the situation. What if you are using the word as prayer or as study or as an expression of care? And let us say your adversaries are partners with you in this. Do you also pay a price with your rejectionists for this cooperation? Yes. Do you feel insignificant and a sense of futility in the face of the more powerful who are negotiating? Not really, because you are actually doing something concrete where they may not be, engaging in gestures and concrete actions that every day improve someone’s life. And when you do it with your enemies you are also creating some reconciliation where there was none. You are not only not disempowered by the official dialogue, you are doing better work than they are, making more progress, and the ups and downs of their negotiation affect you far less. You are culturally, ethically, and psychologically, in a much deeper place, and much more independent of the vagaries of power relations.

Religious dialogue, however, is here to stay as a method of peacemaking and it matters a great deal in many cultures. But here are some caveats as to how it should be done. In my years of experience with training people from every religion and every region the basic sociological reality remains constant in terms of the dynamics of dialogic encounter. The same is true of the many workshops between enemies that I have witnessed. The more people in a room around a table, the more lies that are spoken, the more distorted the presentation of self, the more tribalistic the psychology of adversaries.

With every decrease in the number of participants the more truth that is revealed, the more we find emotional honesty, trust, risks taken, confessions made, apologies offered. There are more frank depictions of the past, more creative visions of the future, and more people who act as if they represent themselves rather than some artificial or mythic construct of their group. The best of all seem to be one-on-one dialogic encounters, and relationships that develop between adversaries in informal settings.

One simply cannot escape notice of the progressive way in which larger and larger groups of human beings tend to behave in ways that they themselves cannot control.

And the less individual control the more that aggression seems to surface. The far end of the spectrum here is a state in which aggression and enemy psychology reaches a level of mass hypnosis, and a hysteria of other directed rage. One can see this occasionally played out in European soccer events. But the meeting of warriors on the battlefield is the most ancient and perennial example. And I have seen this progressive level of aggression play itself out in many an Arab-Jewish encounter, for example. The greater the number of people the worse the encounter, particularly because the mediators were totally unprepared for the mob psychology occasioned by large groups. Conversely, the smaller the encounter the less skills are required by the mediators, and the more chance of success¹.

Dialogue has many permutations, and one interesting development, at least in the interfaith encounter in Israel, has been shared study. Several Israeli interfaith organizations have moved in this direction, sharing numerous study sessions on each others' religions. Yehuda Stolov of the Israel Interfaith Association, as well as the Yakar Institute, have worked rather brilliantly and tirelessly on these meetings with great success. Study appears to be a rather natural activity for Jews and Arabs trying to get to know each other, and may, in fact, create much deeper bonds than Western styles of dialogue about "problems".

The text centered reverence in Judaism and Islam is a likely cause of this successful mode of interaction, as well as the power and wonder of discovering shared values and traditions before one engages in difficult exchanges with adversaries about inflicted injuries. In this case, study, which is in fact dialogic, is also a deed, it is an act of honoring of another's tradition.

We may be witnessing the birth of an indigenous method of conflict resolution that has public joint study and appreciation at its core, while the difficult exchanges on the conflict are reserved for intentional meetings in a very private space. This maximizes the possibility of honesty but minimizes the possibility of dishonor and shame for the respective religious traditions. This may be a formula that will work best for conservative traditions in the region.

¹ Let me emphasize that 'success' for me does not mean a happy encounter in which there is no fighting. I think fighting is necessary and important for conflict resolution processes. But these processes need careful guidance and skilled mediation. My disappointment with the large group encounter is that it seems to make impotent many decent intermediaries. There is certainly a range of skills in the field, and some manage large groups better than others. But it is an inescapable fact of both dialogic encounter between enemies, and even the educational encounter as such, that large numbers decrease the quality of the encounter. Worse still, I have seen too many people leave a large dialogue convinced—where they were not before—that peace is impossible.

The deep resentments and competing mythologies of the Abrahamic families are an important underlying cause of the persistence of the Arab/Israeli conflict, as well as the historical Western confrontation with Islam and the Middle East. Such patterns of study sidestep, if only for a time, those ancient resentments and competitions. They create temporary but sacred time of reconciliation, and temporary suspension of judgment. The dialogic encounter is essential to this experience. The theme of oasis creation for shared study is critical here, as it has always been as a first stage of peace.

As a result, there are many people who participate in these exchanges who start mulling over in their minds and hearts a new understanding of these ancient jealousies, and possibly new ways to envision monotheism, the Abrahamic family, and the possibilities of coexistence².

It is absolutely true that such religious dialogic exchanges, at least in their public face, often veer away from the most controversial subjects. But there is a unique way in which this is unfolding and yielding great benefits for peace and justice. For example, it was surprising to me that in the winter of 2000, when so many other, problem-centered, Palestinian/Israeli dialogues fell apart, that Stolov's inter-religious seminars inside Israel not only continued but seemed to become more intense a place of meeting with rather prominent people from both sides in attendance. Why was it not boycotted? Perhaps because from the beginning it was a place of honoring and equality rather than a place of negotiation. Yes, they avoided politics but they seemed to building something deeper.

I have also been informed of more controversial study of late on the sacredness of land, or the importance of Jerusalem in all the faiths. This is a vital and unique way in which religious people are beginning the process of valuating the enemy other's attachment to and care for the same sacred space. We must pay close attention here to these developments. Very religious people do not--and perhaps cannot--approach the enemy other in the same way that, say, a military general might, or a seasoned diplomat, or an attorney. Religious people may be, and are in their public lives, also generals and attorneys and diplomats. But in their religious personalities, in their deepest space of religious authenticity, it may very well be that a different mode of interaction is necessary with the enemy other, or the competing Abrahamic monotheist. An inter-religious textual study on the sacredness of Jerusalem, a study

² For a more in-depth discussion, see Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2000); idem, *Holy War, Holy Peace* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 2002); idem, "Forward," in Shireen Hunter, *The Future of Islam and the West* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), vi-xi.

of all the texts, traditions, metaphors and symbols of all peoples, in a respectful, non-belligerent atmosphere, may be doing things that no rational dialogue or rational bargaining session could ever accomplish.

This may very well be setting the stage for future coexistence in Jerusalem in a way that no rational bargaining can do right now. Furthermore, even if there are rational breakthroughs on these matters, the latter may only impact a limited elite, whereas the religious re-visioning of sacred spaces has the potential to impact the existential orientation of millions of citizens in many countries. That is why, while I sympathize with those pragmatists who worry that such inter-faith exchanges are a smokescreen for inactivity, I beg to differ. Something extraordinary is happening here, and we could magnify this significantly if more people of influence on all sides would have the courage to support this engagement for the masses.

The discovery of study as a path of inter-faith meeting and conflict resolution is an extraordinary development in conflict resolution practice, although it is still at an early stage of development, to be sure. This never would have come about in the United States or Europe, despite the fact that the progressive cultures of the latter too often consider themselves the sole font of wisdom on peacemaking. It is true that in the Middle East all three Abrahamic faiths are evolving some very dangerous patterns of anti-modernist fundamentalism. But new possibilities are emerging at the same time! It turns out, for example, that for legal and ritual reasons, inter-faith prayer is a very problematic gesture for Islamic, Jewish, and Christian traditionalists, despite its revered status in Western circles of peacemaking. Shared prayer involves direct violations of old laws designed to maintain certain boundaries.

At the same time, study is a particularly sanctified practice in Judaism, but has old roots in Islam and Christianity as well. There are those who prohibit study of Torah with non-Jews, however, for a variety of historical reasons, involving very bad experiences of use of information gained in shared study to attack the Jewish community or to use the learning to infiltrate, misinterpret, and missionize the unsuspecting—yet another disastrous injury³. Thus, this path will not be for all religious Jews, although reassurances from the Christian community that the past will not be repeated could bring more people in. For those who do participate, this will yield important results in terms of interreligious understanding. Of course, it will not do much to solve the questions of national boundaries or refugees, but that is not its purpose. All contact is good if it leads to informal relationships that expand the circles

³ See Robert Chazan, "Jewish Suffering: the Interplay of Medieval Christian and Jewish Perspectives," Occasional Papers II, Trinity College (1998) (ISBN: 1-58044-002-9). On the general attitude of the Church right up to the nineteenth century, in which forced sermons continued though less frequently, see David Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara* (Newbury Park, CA: Vintage Press, 1998).

of those who come to know and understand the enemy, and who come to resist the destructive mythification of the other.

Destructive mythification is only born in spaces of non-contact, adversarial contact, or ignorance. This does require, therefore, that such shared study becomes ongoing, and leads to or becomes a part of ongoing contact and relationship building on a deeper level. It really must yield new intimacies, such as the kind that come from mutual invitations to homes and meetings with families. This has occurred, and it should be emphasized how crucial this is to the success of dialogue that truly is transformative.

This kind of shared study and mutual learning, not for the purposes of debate or conversion, is a new form of monotheistic relationship that we must recognize and encourage. This innovation itself in the history of monotheism will engender a certain kind of healing and reconciliation for many deeply religious people.

What are we to make of the more traditional forms of inter-religious dialogue? We must ask questions and do more critical research. What models have worked better over the years, and what models have failed? Many of the same considerations of conflict resolution theory regarding states or other large entities need to be applied to religious institutions. Strategies such as confidence-building measures and unilateral gestures have all been used at one time or another in interfaith work, but little has been done to document the successes and failures of these methods in religious settings.

There are discernible patterns of progression in interfaith conflict resolution that, if properly identified, may provide a framework of analysis and activism not currently available. For example, in the past decade there has been a remarkable development in the Catholic Church's attitude toward Jews and Judaism that has progressed from papal pronouncements to changes in catechisms and educational materials⁴. This is

⁴ For a full account, see Eugene Fisher, *Faith Without Prejudice* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 1993), ch. 7; idem, "Evolution of a Tradition," in *Fifteen Years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue, 1970-1985*, ed. International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (Rome: Vatican Library, distributed by Lateran University, 1988), ch. 10; Eugene Fisher and Leon Klenicki, *In Our Time: The Flowering of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990); for a Jewish response to the new catechism, see Rabbi Leon Klenicki, "The New Catholic Catechism and the Jews," in *Professional Approaches for Christian Educators(PACE)* 23 (April 1994).

of profound importance because it represents not only a theological shift but also a commitment to change the attitudes of almost a billion believers. The confidence-building character of this development, especially for those who have felt deeply injured by the long history of repression of Jews and Judaism, is remarkable.

This is not to say that there are not still some serious disagreements. Most of the disagreements involve acknowledging past wrongs of the Church, and conflict resolution theory and practice would be useful in both analyzing this conflict and its dialogic processes of resolution. Thus, for example, there needs to be greater attention to the perspectival differences of both parties. Many members of the Jewish community point out past sins of the Church, especially during the Holocaust, such as Pope Pius XII's actions or lack thereof. But members of the Jewish community tend to under-emphasize the heroic role of other popes, most noticeably the most recent two, who were particularly committed to the Jews during the Holocaust. For some, this is the expression of a need to be angry at a long history of mistreatment, but for others it expresses a desire for apology from the highest sources.

There is an intense cultural difference at work here as well, regarding the evaluation of papal behavior. The sinfulness of a pope is as scandalous and painful in Catholicism as the sinfulness of a *rebbe* would be in Hasidism, maybe moreso. But there are a variety of views here in both communities, and for many religious people it is vital to acknowledge with humility that all people and all institutions are capable of sin.

The doctrine of inerrancy causes major problems of interfaith dialogue that go beyond evaluations of a pope. Inerrancy cuts to the heart of the contours of faith, doubt, uncertainty, and the search for unassailable truths in a very murky world. It involves not only questions about popes but also the actions of other major religious figures, prophets, saviors, as well as flaws of laws enshrined in sacredness.

Asymmetry of power is another important problem in conflict resolving processes, such as dialogue encounters. Simply stated, adversary groups often come out of circumstances in which one group has more military, economic, political and/or demographic power than the other group. But the asymmetry also may express itself in the nature of the encounter, its language, structure, and cultural ethos. This skews dialogue and contact between enemy groups as a method of conflict resolution. I would argue that dialogue itself, as a method of peacemaking, is culturally charged, maybe even biased, and may not satisfy or correspond to the best cultural methods that a group may possess for peacemaking and the transformation of enemy relationships. A peacemaking method can produce asymmetry in and of itself if its

execution favors the skills of one group over another, or one sub-community of each group.

Which language is used is an important subset of asymmetry questions depending on who is comfortable with what language in these encounters, and what political statements are being made in a symbolic sense by the use of one language.

Finally, rational negotiations and dialogue can do nothing for the dead, the murdered on all sides. And the murdered weigh on survivors as a burden of indescribable pressure. In non-rational terms, this is the tremendous power that ghosts of the dead play in so many global traditions. Survivor guilt, in my experience, is a principal goad that motivates those who perpetuate conflict. The conflict is a way to keep the memory of the dead alive and the guilt of survival assuaged.

Religious dialogue, to truly move people away from hatred and war, must find prominent ways to “bring into the room” those who are voiceless, such as children, those who are non-verbally inclined, and especially the murdered. They must be honored and considered in order for the dialogic moment to not feel like a betrayal. Religious traditions are eminently capable of bringing these others into a room. But the means by which this happens, through symbol or prayer or shared ethical deed, must be negotiated and arrived at as a part of the relationship and trust building tasks of the group encounter I want to end with a series of shorter points, some of which summarize earlier comments:

1. It is critical that religious dialogue be an act as well as a verbal communication. That act must be honorable. The act of dialogue must consider and anticipate what constitutes civility and dignity for all the cultures in question. It is critical, therefore, that dialogue participants become part of the process of creating a temporary community which embraces guidelines of treatment and civility, honest conversations, permissible and impermissible means of dealing with hard truths.
2. Dialogue is inherently exclusionary. It is excluding everyone who is not in the room. Therefore, it is critical that this be acknowledged, and all the excluded groups become part of the imagined conversation in terms of ultimate solutions. Otherwise it is an exercise in futility.
3. Shared study and shared practices should be considered as alternative forms of dialogic encounter, or as critical adjuncts to inter-religious dialogue.
4. Dialogue can be crucial at the right time and insulting at the wrong time. It can be at the mercy of levels of rage at certain times. It must be time sensitive.

5. Dialogic encounter should always be geared toward a goal that is measurable by the layman participant, especially if he or she is a member of the group that is initiating the fighting. Otherwise it is perceived, and perhaps is, a substitute for progress.

6. Dialogue should really be a subset of a wide range of informal processes that move the parties toward a transformation of relationship at a deep level. Relationships of respect, sympathy, and dignity, engender trust, stimulate novel solutions, and enhance the possibility of moving from good thoughts and words to deeds. Only good deeds create peace and justice ultimately, and only good relationships move us toward good deeds.

Inter-faith dialogue is good to the degree to which it helps generate good relationships which lead to good deeds which lead to peace and justice actualized.
