

Oddbjørn Leirvik. The double sense of recognition in interreligious theology

Denne artikkelen er publisert i **Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon vol 60(3/4), side 283-286**

Arkivert i DUO med tillatelse fra Egede instituttet <http://www.kirken.no/egede/>



Årgang 60

2006

Nr. 3-4

# Norsk tidsskrift for misjon

Spiritualitet og dialog  
Festskrift til professor dr. Notto Reidar Thelle  
i anledning 65-årsdagen 19. mars 2006

*Edithen Hamble  
The double sense of recognition  
in Luther's theology*



EGEDE INSTITUTTET

### **Interreligious dialogue and Gender: Can interreligious dialogue contribute to more gender justice?**

Can interreligious dialogue contribute to greater gender justice both within Christian and Muslim Faith communities taking part in the dialogues, and in general society? This question is not at all fully answered in this article. However, I have pointed at some criteria which has to be fulfilled if interreligious dialogue can be expected to contribute to gender justice. Including a gender perspective is a necessary starting point, no matter if the reseptive dialogue partners have different views upon what gender justice really is concerning both gender models within faith communities and within the structures of interreligious dialogue itself. Christian-Muslim dialogue can also work out theoretical tools for general society concerning the potential conflict area between the integrity of the women, particularly minority women – and the claims of general society.

But if a gender perspective and consciousness about gendered structures of power are excluded from the areas of interreligious dialogue, there is a possibility that interreligious dialogue can confirm and even strenghten today's gendered power structures within faith communities. This will happen at the expence of women's possibilities, and women's integrity.

*Anne Hege Grung*, f. 1965, cand.theol, Det teologiske fakultet, UiO 1991. Studentprest i Oslo, Norges Kristelige Studentforbund, 1992-1995, Kirkens Bymisjon 1994-1997. Dialogsenteret Emmaus fra 1997-2006. Olavsstipendiat 2005. PhD-stipendiat, CULCOM, UiB Oslo, fra 2006 (Kulturell kompleksitet i det nye Norge). *Dialog med og uten slør* sammen med muslimen Lena Larsen, 2000.

## The double sense of recognition in interreligious theology

ODDBJØRN LEIRVIK

The title of the following reflection on similarities and differences across religious boundaries has got two cues: "recognition" and "interreligious theology".

In the English idiom, recognition can either mean rediscovery of things familiar (in Norwegian: "gjenkjenning") or acknowledgment of something that may be distinctively unfamiliar but is still worthy of appreciation (in Norwegian: "anerkjenning", cf. the English expression "politics of recognition"). In the encounter with other faiths, I may recognize essential features of faith that are equally dear to me. But just as often, I face the challenge of coming to terms with conceptions and practices that are foreign and do not give any immediate sense to me. Can I still acknowledge and appreciate such conceptions and practices, as expressions of a God-given diversity? Sometimes I can, in other cases not.

In this essay, I will reflect upon the double sense of recognition (as rediscovery and appreciation) in interreligious theology. I use the term "interreligious theology" as a reference to dialogical reflection on ultimate questions, carried out in the space between different religious universes. With "the space between", I allude to Martin Buber's conception of a sacred realm which opens when people of different faiths speak profoundly to one another, from heart to heart:

*In the most powerful moments of dialogic, where in truth "deep calls unto deep", it becomes unmistakably clear that it is not the wand of the individual or of the social, but of a third which draws the circle round the happening. On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of "between" (Buber 2002: 242f).*

By its focus on dialogue, the notion of interreligious theology transcends "theology of religion" which is usually conceived of as a systematic reflection on the relation between different faiths carried out by the "I" in Buber's sense. As it will be used in this essay, interreligious theology approximates the notion of "comparative theology" as used by Francis X. Clooney and Paul F. Knitter (Knitter 2002: 202-214). In contrast to detached comparison, Knitter defines comparative theology as a dialogical effort that (in Buber's sense) can only be carried out in a living encounter between I and Thou. As Knitter notes, comparative theologians are wary of grand comparisons between religions as monolithic entities. They prefer instead to focus on specific texts, concrete rituals or focused beliefs (ibid: 207).

### **Recognition as discovery of similarity**

When encountering a foreign religion, the first impulse is often apologetic. In an apologetic approach, one searches for perceptions of faith that may confirm standard conceptions of the world religions as fundamentally different in their conceptions of God, the human being, salvation and ethics. If one opts for a more dialogical approach, the primary impulse is rather to seek for resemblances. Whereas the apologetic theologian has to face the question of how to accommodate for real resemblances, anyone inclined to finding similarities must face the question of how to avoid the danger of reducing the faith of the Other to merely more of the same (from the vantage point of the I). According to Levinas, the challenge of any dialogue is how to approach the Other while respecting the distance of incomprehensiveness. *In Of God who comes to mind*, he speaks of

*... the extraordinary and immediate relation of dialogue, which transcends this distance without suppressing it or recu-*

*perating it, as does the gaze that crosses the distance separating it from an object in the world, while comprehending and encompassing that distance (Levinas 1998: 144).*

However, for theologians who want to engage in dialogue the first impulse is often to look for resemblances and ways to cross the distance. A lucid example of this approach can be found in an essay by Peggy Starkey entitled "Agape: A Christian criterion of truth in the other world religions". Her essay was published in the World Council of Churches' *International Review of Mission* in 1985, together with a number of responses from ecumenical theologians (Starkey 1985).

Critically recognizing that a neutral approach to other faiths is simply impossible, Starkey states that "In evaluating other religions, a theologian must begin from the perspective of his or her own religion" (ibid: 425). In tune with Knitter's definition of comparative theology, Starkey signals her intention to address the question of *truth* (Knitter 2002: 207). But her vantage point is clearly that of the Christian I: "... from a Christian perspective it can be said that other religions contain truth insofar as they contain revelation that requires a human response of love (*agape*) toward other human beings" (Starkey 1985: 435).

Starkey defines the Christian concept of *agape* as "selfless love" inspired by God and constituting "a way of life" for the believer (ibid: 434). In her examination of relevant passages from the holy scriptures of other world religions, Starkey seems to aim at recognition in the sense of rediscovery: "... I am presenting what a Christian might find revelatory and salvific in these religions insofar as they appear to express or echo the Christian concept of *agape*" (ibid: 435).

Her conclusion attests to the truth of Jesus' saying in Matthew 7: 7, "Seek and you will find". In Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism as well as Confucianism Starkey finds echoes of *agape* in "the numerous appeals for compassion or sympathy, charity or benevolence, mercy, loving-kindness, respect, justice, forgiveness, uprightness and selflessness or self-sacrifice" (ibid: 462f). Who could hope for more, when these qualities are defined not only as moral ideals but as "saving values" as well (cf. Dupuis 1997: 321-326)?

What Starkey found, was more of the same from the vantage point of Christian theology, or rather, from the perspective of a particular perception of Christian soteriology which emphasizes the completion of true faith in good works (cf. James 2: 22). Other theologians take a different point of departure in their search for resemblances between Christian tenets and similar conceptions in other religions. In the following, I exemplify how some Reformed and Lutheran theologians have searched for interreligious confirmation of the concept of salvation by faith alone.

When Karl Barth sets out to define "True religion" in *Church Dogmatics* (Vol. I, Part 2, § 17), he is emphatic that neither Christianity nor other religions can be true other than in the sense of proclaiming that the human being is saved by divine grace alone – i.e. not as a fulfilled practitioner of *agape*, but as a justified sinner (Barth 1988: 325f). Religions (including Christianity) are only true insofar as they proclaim the doctrine of *iustificatio impii* (ibid: 337). In the view of Barth, what is at stake is not the truth or falseness of Christianity or any other historical religion, but the metaphysical reality of grace itself (ibid: 339).

According to Barth, the reality of divine grace as revealed by Christ constitutes the center of Christianity but is not exclusively (and not always) preached by the Christian religion. Barth finds that the reality of grace is also reflected in a particular strand of Buddhism, namely Pure Land Buddhism (*jodo shin-shu*) which was developed in Japan in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The scriptures of its founding teachers Genku-Honen and Shinran anchor salvation not in successful discipline but in Amida Buddha's grace alone. In the conventional view, Pure Land Buddhism was developed as an alternative to the spiritual disciplines of Zen Buddhism that were widely considered as too severe for the masses and therefore unattainable as a path to salvific enlightenment. Instead, Pure Land Buddhism invites the believer to put his trust in the "primal vow" of Amida Buddha – relying completely on the "other power" (*tariki*) of grace instead of the highly limited power of the self (*jiriki*) to improve one's ways.

Seemingly striking a reformed alliance across religious boundaries, Barth speaks of Pure Land Buddhism as "Japanese Protestantism" and considers also the Hindu *Bhakti* religion as another Eastern parallel to the Protestant conception of grace (ibid: 341f).

Rather triumphant on Reformed Christianity's behalf, he suggests that

... the most adequate and comprehensive and illuminating heathen parallel to Christianity, a religious development in the Far East, is parallel not to Roman or Greek Catholicism, but to Reformed Christianity, thus confronting Christianity with the question of its truth even as the logical religion of grace (ibid: 340).

Conversely, Barth notes that Francis Xavier, the co-founder of the Jesuit order who was also the first Christian missionary to live in Japan, rediscovered in Pure Land Buddhism the "Lutheran heresy" (ibid: 341).

Although one might not agree with Barth's attempt at striking a Protestant-Buddhist alliance against Catholicism, the example testifies to the fact that profound theological disagreement does not in any way coincide with the boundaries of the religions. It cuts right across those boundaries and interreligious dialogue leads often to a renewed reflection on diversity and tensions in one's own religion.

With a background in Scandinavian Lutheranism, my colleague at the Faculty of Theology in Oslo Notto R. Thelle took a similar interest in Pure Land Buddhism in the first phases of his work as a missionary in Japan. In an early article about Buddhism and Christianity, published in *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon* in 1974 (Thelle 1974), he recognizes in Shinran's Pure Land teachings some central insights of Paul in the New Testament. Hence Thelle gives his translation of and commentary to the Pure Land "gospel" of *Tannisho* the title "A Buddhist Epistle to the Romans".

As Thelle explains, the hope of being reborn in the Pure Land of Amida rests not on good deeds but merely on Amida Buddha's vow which is appropriated by the believer by the recitation of the Nembutsu formula of refuge. Even the desire to recite the Nembutsu suffices (*Tannisho* ch. 1). Coming astonishing close to Pauline insights, the opening of *Tannisho* ch. 3 reads as follows: "If the righteous enter into life, how much more in the case of sinners."

But Thelle notes also important differences between the Pauli-

rences between the two religions. In contrast, dialogically minded theologians will often find far more similarities between the two religions than what the average believer would normally be ready to subscribe to.

In an effort at self-scrutiny, I recognize the latter tendency in myself. As a Lutheran theologian, I too have been interested in finding possible points of convergence with Islam for the idea of salvation by grace alone. But is that possible at all? Isn't Islam the religion of law par excellence, a "doctrine of works" as Luther had it (Luther 1958-, vol. 46: 177)? That depends on the eye of the beholder. When my undergraduate students explore the relation between Christianity and Islam, they read also a selection of texts by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Muslim mystic Rumi. One of the texts that have been selected carries the title "The man who looked back on his way to hell" (Mathnawi V: 1806-1846, cf. Nicholson 1995: 56f). In this story, Rumi presents us with a morally failed person which is saved from hell by divine love that appears to be utterly undeserved. When the guardian angels drag the poor man towards hell, he sees before him a black scroll in which his plentiful mischief is carefully listed. The man readily admits that the truth of his life is even worse than what is written. But instead of despairing, he makes a final appeal to the grace of God:

*Beyond living righteously or behaving disobediently – I had a (great) hope in Thy pure lovingkindness ... I turn my face back to that pure grace: I am not looking towards my own actions. I turn my hope towards that hope, for Thou hast given me existence older than of old. Thou gavest (me) existence, free of cost, as a robe of honour: I have always relied on that (generosity) (Mathnawi V: 1839-1843).*

And God says: "O angels, bring him back to Us, for his inward eye has (ever) been (turned) towards hope. Like one who recks of naught, We will set him free and cancel all his trespasses" (Mathnawi V: 1845f).

In other words: I too found what I was looking for, a sample of the pure gospel of grace within Islam. Against the objection that Rumi's gospel of grace might not be representative of the central tenets of Islam, I would suggest that the poor fellow in Rumi's

story, in his final appeal to God, could be seen as simply repeating the very heartbeat of Muslim devotion. I'm referring to the *basmala* formula "in the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful" – which prefaces every chapter of the Qur'an and every serious endeavour by a Muslim.

### **Can painful differences be appreciated?**

The *basmala* resembles the heartbeat of Christian devotion. But it's still different, having been transposed to a different religious universe. The Muslim faith in divine grace is mediated by rites that are different from those of Christianity, through rituals that probably also evoke different religious emotions. But against the conventional wisdom that Islamic rituals are geared towards obedient submission and not towards loving communion with God, it should be noted that unity with the God of Love is exactly the aim of Sufi rituals, not least the ones that are practiced in Rumi's Mevlevi order.

Whether a Christian rediscovery of the gospel of pure grace in Islam tells something true about Islam or only testifies to the distorting perception of a Christian theologian, can in fact be transformed to a question of who decides what is central and what is peripheral in a given religious tradition. Depending on the perspective of your choice, Islam as well as Christianity may take the form either of a religion of law or of a religion of grace.

The emphasis may be different in both religions, and the mediation of grace is conceived of in different terms and practiced in highly different rituals (which in the case of Islam gives no space for communion with God in Christ). But the very dialectic between salvation by faith alone and the saving values of selfless love can be found in Christianity as well as Islam. If Christians and Muslims engage each other in a serious conversation about grace and selfless love, why shouldn't believers of both religions become as enlightened and enriched as Roman Catholics and Lutherans have been through recent ecumenical talks about faith and good works?

In Christian-Muslim dialogue, many similarities can be discovered in the way we conceive of God, salvation and the relation between grace and good works. In the case of striking differences, we will often find that our disagreements run right across reli-

gious boundaries. For instance, the relation between grace and good works is just as much a topic for intra-Christian, ecumenical conversation as for interreligious, say Christian-Muslim dialogue.

I am not implying that ecumenical conversation and interreligious dialogue is one and the same thing. What unites Christians, across painful confessional differences, is a common faith in the mediating and redemptive role of Christ. Therefore in interreligious dialogue, Christians are challenged to rethink the relation between certain elements of faith (e.g., salvation by grace alone) and the (exclusive or not) anchoring of these elements in Christ's redemptive work.

When doing interreligious theology, Christians can hardly avoid the pain that comes with the recognition that Christ is seen in a distinctively different light in Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam compared to the constitutive role of Jesus Christ in the Christian faith. Can painful differences in the image of Jesus Christ still be recognized as something valuable to be appreciated?

In conclusion, I will point to a contemporary Muslim how has answered this question in the positive. In an essay about the dialogical relationship between Christianity and Islam, published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* in 1972, the Shi'ite Muslim thinker Hasan Askari writes about the discovery of the religiously Other as a soothing as well as painful experience: "The discovery of the other, of our own being, is both soothing and painful, more the latter. The other is pain, a sting, a bite, but a pain in our very being, of it". Maybe indicative of a Shi'ite sensitivity towards the religious significance of suffering, he adds: 'It is right in the middle of this pain that a Divine sign is known' (Askari 1972: 486).

Askari sees both the human mind and divine revelation as essentially dialogical in nature. Exposing the dialogical relation between Christianity and Islam, Askari focuses much of his attention on the two religions' different perceptions of Christ (as the Word of God incarnate and one of God's prophets respectively). Convinced that Christianity and Islam constitute 'a dialogical whole', Askari speaks of Christ as a common sign of God for Christians and Muslims, a sign that by virtue of being understood differently 'liberates man from the dead circle of monological religion and restores unto him his genuine dialogical existence' (ibid: 483).

According to Askari, the fact of conflicting interpretations should not be regarded as a threat, but rather as a reflection of what a divine sign implies: 'It is the very ambiguity, richness, of the religious sign that gives rise to different and even opposed interpretations and understandings' (ibid.: 485). He concludes that Christianity and Islam constitute in fact 'one complex of faith' – one starting with the living Person, the other with the written Word: 'Their separateness does not denote two areas of conflicting truths, but a dialogical necessity' (ibid: 485).

It is in this theological context that Askari speaks of the discovery of the Other as both soothing and painful, as a sting in our Selfhood. According to Askari, a dialogical relationship based solely on the recognition of similarities, is lacking something – not only in its human qualities but also in its divine purpose.

If Askari is right, interreligious theology must try to integrate the pain of difference as something that might even be willed by God. Maybe this is also the nature of doing theology on the narrow ridge that Buber's speaks of? 'On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where I and Thou meet, there is the realm of "between"' (Buber 2002: 242f).

In tune with Buber's metaphor, but with a surprising twist, the Finnish New Testament scholar Heikki Räisänen has spoken of Jesus Christ as "standing between" Christians and Muslims. In his book *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma*, he writes:

*Jesus has of old stood 'between Christianity and Islam' in the sense that his different position in the two religions has been a hindrance to an encounter. Yet today it is also possible to think that he stands between the two (actually between three religions, for Judaism should be included in a 'trialogue') in the opposite sense: in the no man's land, or on the common ground which does not belong to a any single party. Jesus was not a Christian, and his vision overlaps only partially with Christianity. Nor was he a Muslim, though Muslims are right in esteeming him and finding points of contact with Islam in his message. He stands in-between (Räisänen 1997: 96f).*

Although the image of Jesus Christ standing "in-between" Christians, Muslims and Jews is a meaningful one, I find Räisänen's visi-

on of Christ as standing in "the no man's land" and constituting a "common ground" more problematic. From a critical perspective, Christ is only accessible through out the believers' differing interpretations of the sign that he constitutes. This means that in any dialogue about Christ "in-between", believers are turned towards one another and must be able integrate the pain of conflicting faiths.

In that perspective, Askari's reflection on the painful but opening ambiguity of a divine sign tunes in with Buber's vision of I and Thou doing theology not on common ground, but on a narrow ridge where all partners in dialogue might be as vulnerable as Christ himself.

## References

- Askari, Hasan. 1972. The Dialogical Relationship between Christianity and Islam. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9:477-488.
- Barth, Karl. 1988. *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, Part 2. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.
- Buber, Martin. 2002. *Between Man and Man. With an introduction by Maurice Friedman*. Translated by R. G. Smith. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dupuis, Jaques. 1997. *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis.
- Jørgensen, Theodor. 2000. Kann ein Nicht-Christ durch Glaube gerechtfertigt werden? Religionstheologische Überlegungen zur Heilsfrage. In *Zutrauen zur Theologie. Akademische Theologie und die Erneuerung der Kirche. Festgabe für Christof Gestrinch zum 60. Geburtstag*, edited by A.-K. F. u. J. Zehner. Berlin: Wichern-Verlag.
- Knitter, Paul F. 2002. *Introducing Theologies of Religions*. Marknoll, New York: Orbis books.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1998. *Of God who Comes to Mind*. Translated by B. Bergo, *Meridian Crossing Aesthetics*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Luther, Martin. 1958-. *Luther's Works*. Saint Louis/Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing Press/Fortress Press.
- Nicholson, Reynold A. 1995. Rûmî. *Poet and Mystic*. Oxford: One-world.
- Räisänen, Heikki. 1997. *Muhammad, Marcion and the Mahatma. Exegetical Perspectives on the Encounter of Cultures and Faiths*. London: SCM Press.
- Rûmî, Jalâluddin. 1977. *The Mathnawî of Jalâluddîn Rûmî. Edited from the oldest manuscripts available: with critical notes, translation, & commentary by Reynold A. Nicholson*. Translated by R. A. Nicholson. London: Luzac & Co.
- Starkey, Peggy. 1985. Agape: A Christian criterion of truth in the other world religions. *International Review of Mission* LXXIV (3):425-515.



Thelle, Notto R. 1974. Et buddhistisk Romerbrev. *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon* (3):129-154.

———. 1991. *Hvem kan stoppe vinden? Vandringer i grenseland mellom Øst og Vest*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

———. 2001. *Zen - lyden av én hånd*. Oslo: Gyldendal.

Oddbjørn Leirvik, f. 1951, /Cand.theol. MF 1978, Dr.theol. TF 2002. Tidlegare forskar og prosjektleiar ved TF (1996-2005), prest i Emmaus (1993-1996), kapellan i Paulus kirke (1984-1993) og generalsekretær i Norges Kristelige Studentforbund (1979-1983). Professor i interreligiøse studier, TF, UiO, 2006. Hans senere bøker omfatter *Human Conscience and Muslim-Christian Relations* (Routledge 2006), *Islam og kristendom. Konflikt eller dialog?* ["Islam and Christianity. Conflict or Dialogue?"] Pax 2006], *The Power of Faiths in Global Politics* (ed. with Sturla J. Stålsett, Novus 2004).

## Notto Reidar Thelles forfatterskap: Bøker, artikler og bokanmeldelser 1970-2006

SVEIN HELGE BIRKEFLET

### 1970-75

- 1 Misjonerende buddhisme. Et moment til forståelse av kristen misjonshistorie. I: *Norsk tidsskrift for misjon* 24 (1970) s. 184-87.
- 2 Japanisme som religiøs holdning. I: *Norsk tidsskrift for misjon* 26 (1972) s. 65-76.
- 3 Buddhismen som utfordring til kristenheten. I: *Kirke og kultur* 78 (1973) s. 15-26.
- 4 Den asiatiske bølge. I: *Kirke og kultur* 78 (1973) s. 388-97.
- 5 Når buddhister og kristne møtes. [Replik til Arne Tørjesens debattinnlegg: "Buddhistene som utfordring til kristne mennesker" i *Kirke og kultur* 78 (1973) s. 313-15]. I: *Kirke og kultur* 78 (1973) s. 441-43.
- 6 Buddhismen. En søken mot den fullkomne frihet. Oslo: Den nordiske Østasiamisjon, 1974. 47 s.
- 7 Et buddhistisk Romerbrev. I: *På vejen til Japan*. Red. av Sigurd Granild et al. Hellerup: DMS-forlag, 1974. 10 s.7
- 8 Et buddhistisk Romerbrev. I: *Norsk tidsskrift for misjon* 28 (1974) s. 129-54.
- 9 Judas og Guds Moder. [Om Shusaku Endos' roman "Taus himmel"]. I: *Kirke og kultur* 79 (1974) s. 449-59.