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Artists in dialogue
Creative approaches to interreligious encounters

This article explores the forms and functions of contemporary interreligious dialogue by focusing on artists who are active in this field. They represent different art forms and different religious positions: with their roots in Judaism, Christianity and Islam they have opted for a variety of positions, ranging from traditional adherence to renunciation of a personal religious engagement, or a fascination for new forms of religiosity. The aim is to critically examine interreligious dialogue and to provide an alternative perspective on the topic, based on both theoretical and empirical analyses.

The article seeks an understanding of how persons engaging in creative forms of dialogue formulate a dialogic worldview in a religiously plural and post-secular context and what motivates them to engage in dialogue. Traditional normative theories of interreligious dialogue are hence called into question. Critical attention is brought to the narrow focus on dialogue as a purely intellectual quest for making the religious other, as a coherent theological and historical entity, intelligible. A contrasting view of dialogue as a question of interpersonal ethics is introduced, inspired primarily by the philosophy of Buber. Also the works of Habermas, Gadamer, Levinas, Løgstrup, Wittgenstein and Gaita are central to the research.

Introduction

Conversations across boundaries of identity – whether national, religious, or something else – begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from a place other than your own. . . . I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. Conversation doesn't have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values;

it's enough that it helps people get used to one another. (Appiah 2006: 85.)

It is practices—not principles—that make us able to live together, contends Kwame Anthony Appiah in an analysis of identity and difference in his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Imaginative elements formulated within the context of art can provide significant starting points for such transformative practices, he claims. Furthermore: the imagination can contribute to understanding the other; it is a hermeneutic aid in interpersonal relations as well as in scholarly analyses of otherness. The imagination and ethics are closely interrelated, claims Rosi Braidotti, in a similar vein: ethical relations create possible worlds by activating resources, such as the imagination, that have previously been left untapped. The imagination, hence, becomes the driving force that enables concrete interconnections with others. (Braidotti 2008: 16.)

In the academic study of interreligious dialogue, however, the imagination and imaginative elements have rarely been analysed, as the lion's share of the research has focused predominantly on intellectual dimensions such as the question of truth and how to come to terms with the problem of difference (Deutsch 2004: 99). Today, however, the analytical triad of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, which constitutes the backbone of much research within the field, is increasingly criticised for its inability to account for other aspects of human religiosity than the purely intellectual. As David Tracy claims, not only does the religious other present us with the challenge of 'cognitive ambiguity', but also with 'moral ambiguity' (Tracy 1990: 59). Offering *logical* answers, based on rational reasoning, to the question of religious diversity instead of *dialogical* ones, leaning on ethical

and existential inquiries, is therefore not enough.

The true challenge in dialogue, Martin Buber claims, is for the participants to show greater care for living beings than for theoretical abstractions. Perhaps, in the end, he ponders, neither 'our' truth nor 'their' error will turn out to be quite as we assert it to be (Buber 2000: 131). In a similar spirit, a growing number of studies today choose to depart from the traditional trajectory that portrays dialogue on the basis of a systematic, doctrine-centred approach to religion. The view of different religions as rational belief systems with incompatible truth claims implies a narrow understanding of human religiosity and offers limited prospects for interreligious dialogue, it is argued. For analytical purposes, such approaches seem to stumble on their own implicit fascination with the 'neatness of a comprehensive system' (Barnes 2005: 412). Contemporary global dilemmas such as climate change and international terrorism, furthermore, seem to require models for meaningful co-existence that are built not only on abstract systems of thought, but also a comprehensive understanding of unique individuals and their ways of living a religious reality. As the impact of political agendas and power structures are increasingly highlighted, the notion of dialogue is losing its innocence as an intrinsically positive and constructive endeavour (e.g. Gopin 2005: 56; Pfändtner 2009: 66).

In order to contribute to this discussion and offer an example of a dialogue arena that moves beyond the dichotomies of intellectual–emotional, personal–political, spiritual–practical, I have investigated dialogues within the context of art. This article presents a research project carried out during the years 2008–10 as an empirical exploration of the question at hand. In this paper, a selection of central themes included in the theoretical foundation of the work are outlined and illuminated with the help of empirical analysis.[1]

Artists and creative dialogue

By focusing on the context of art, I wish to complement the understanding of interreligious dialogue as an intellectual practice with other dimensions of the religious consciousness, such as the visual, musical and poetic (Smart 1995: 188; Siejk 1995: 237). Such symbolically dense, imaginative and embodied contexts may provide new channels for understanding, self-assessment and co-existence. Art has the

ability to touch us, not only as rational beings, but as complex, experiencing subjects with feelings, attitudes, memories and hopes for the future. Within art, it becomes evident that the encounter with the religious other is a 'major challenge to mind and heart' as Abraham Joshua Heschel formulates it (Heschel 2000: 312).

I have followed the work of six artists who in their art engage with questions of religious difference and dialogue. I sought to capture their thoughts and reflections through in-depth interviews[2] and correspondence, through visiting their exhibitions, following them in the press and reading their own writings. On the basis of this vast material, I have strived to form an understanding of how they look at the issue of religious difference, what motivates them to engage in dialogue and how they regard the role of art in this context.

An important reason for selecting these artists was that all of them have created art projects addressing interreligious issues. Another reason was that they all have developed a personal understanding of dialogue and—naturally—that they were willing to elaborate on these views and motivations together with me. All artists have their roots in the Abrahamic religions but approach issues of religiosity in different ways. Some consider themselves to be religious in a traditional sense and move comfortably within the theological and institutional frames of their religion. Others describe themselves as distanced from institutionalised religion, or as atheists, lacking a need for personal commitment. Some have renounced any formal belonging to a religious institution and opted for an individualised position formed by spirituality and mysticism. Thus, the artists cannot be characterised according to a single profile: they are Jews, Christians and Muslims; atheist, agnostics and mystics. They represent different art forms and live in different European countries.

In this context, the *inter*-religious is not merely a negotiation of lines separating religious institutions from each other; equally relevant, and challenging, is the process of negotiating identity and distance within traditional communities. Thus, I strive to portray the interplay between similarity and difference in the intriguingly complex fashion evoked by the empirical

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1   A more thorough presentation of the research findings will be published in Illman 2012.

2   The interviews, conducted by the author in Swedish, Finnish and English, were recorded and later transcribed. All quotations in the text refer to these transcripts, which are stored at Åbo Akademi University (see reference list for details).

Name	Field	Year of Birth	Location
Susanne Levin	Literature	1950	Uppsala, Sweden
Marita Liulia	Multimedia art	1957	Helsinki, Finland
Chokri Mensi	Music	1964	Älvsjö, Sweden
Cecilia Parsberg	Visual art	1963	Stockholm, Sweden
Jordi Savall	Music	1941	Barcelona, Spain
Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt	Literature	1960	Brussels, Belgium

Artists appearing in the research project.

material. I call my theoretical framework a creative approach to interreligious dialogue. It is based on several themes—some arising from the material itself, some based on theoretical discussions, including an ethical perspective on dialogue and difference, a focus on practice and spirituality and an emphasis on creative forms of communication. The key concepts used in structuring the analysis are:

- The interplay between *similarity* and *difference*, difference negotiated in the *third space* and the interest in human *complexity*.
- The significance attached to *emotions* and the inclination towards a discourse of spirituality (and mysticism).
- The complex nature of *truth*.
- The importance attached to furthering *peace*—external as well as internal—through dialogue.
- The role of *power*, the balance between majority and minority, influential and marginalised.
- The emphasis on *attitudes* and *values* in dialogue (respect, curiosity, humour, responsibility and active solidarity).
- The fundamental value of *creativity* in building dialogue.
- The recognition of a *common humanity*.

As my space is limited, I cannot give in-depth accounts of all relevant themes that together comprise my understanding of creative dialogue. Instead, I will focus on the central theme of negotiating and redefining the line between similarity and difference in dialogue and present voices from the empirical material on this subject.

Dialogue, distance and relations

My point of entry into the realm of dialogue is the writings of Martin Buber, combined with thoughts of contemporary researchers within, for example, hermeneutics, gender studies and moral philosophy. Such elaborations highlight the need to complement the view of interreligious dialogue, as a discursive comparison between abstract theoretical entities, with views focusing on dialogue between religious subjects: a search for interpersonal relatedness between persons of different religious backgrounds as well as between persons who represent different ways of being religious within the same tradition (Pfändtner 2009: 73). Buber's perception of difference offers a contrast to the dominant apprehension of difference as an established fact that can be described and defined objectively by help of, for example, scientific methods. Furthermore, it challenges the idea that difference is a problem—always and *a priori*.

In Buber's understanding, dialogue begins in the realm of the 'between': the space of reciprocity and openness created in the meeting of I and Thou (Gordon 2004: 99). According to Buber, a person's worldview always includes an 'other', an opponent in the form of an It or a Thou (Buber 1970: 53).[3] The dis-

3   Buber's use of the word 'Du' is usually translated as 'Thou' in English. In his translation of 1970, Walter Kaufmann nevertheless chooses the word 'You'. I–You sounds unfamiliar, he admits, but 'Thou' is quite different from the German 'Du': 'German lovers say *Du* to one another, and so do friends. *Du* is spontaneous and unpretentious, remote from formality and pomp . . .' (Kaufmann, in Buber 1970: 14). Furthermore, 'Thou' immediately brings God to mind, Kaufmann notes. Buber's use of the word 'Du' both for interpersonal relations and for God is however a vital clue to his philosophy. I find these comments fundamental, but still, for clarity, use the conventional Thou.

tanced attitude I–It is supplemented by the relation I–Thou, which represents encounters and dialogue. The relationship I–Thou is a whole-hearted, attentive engagement while the attitude I–It is more distanced and analytic in nature: a reflective, indirect and categorising attitude giving our experiences a place in time and space (Buber 1970: 59, 84–5). I–It can hence be interpreted as a way of creating boundaries between the self and the other; I–Thou as a way of crossing or overcoming the very same. These positions should not be understood as binary opposites or as hierarchically unequal, but rather as complementary aspects of each person's involvement with the world.[4]

As a consequence, identity is always formed in relation to others, Buber claims. In dialogue, the other appears in her/his uniqueness and I can acknowledge: 'This man is not my object; I have got to do with him' (Buber 2002: 11). Dialogue, hence, is the relation of different persons to one another that is only represented in their engagement with each other, that is, 'between' them (Buber 2002: 9). The between cannot exist independently of the persons encountering each other: it is an opening that is unique to and reconstituted in the meeting of I and Thou. The life of dialogue is thus, following Buber, a moral question of affirming the reciprocal space of the 'between'. (Buber 1970: 60, 67.) Encountering a Thou includes accepting her distinctiveness—neither changing nor diminishing otherness by fitting it into pre-fixed images. In the encounter, the Thou appears to me as 'inseparable, incomparable, irreducible'. But human diversity also comprises the I as a unique, dignified perspective on the world, 'existing but once, single, unique, irreducible'. (Buber 2002: 15, 29.)

As a comparison, Emmanuel Levinas makes an even stronger claim for the right of the other to preserve her otherness. His notion of *alterity* describes the absolute otherness of the other: a fact over which I am powerless; an unalterable mystery that I can neither grasp nor own (Levinas 1989: 50). Our rela-

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4   Because of this two-part description, Buber is often criticised for being simplistic and dualistic. The attitudes, however, need to be regarded as different but equally important and mutually inclusive. Instead of a dualism, I interpret it as a description of the manifold nature of interpersonal relationships. There are several ways of saying It—ranging from distanced analysis to abuse and obliteration—and several ways of saying Thou: both in intense experiences and in short moments of a qualified presence (Buber 1970: 84).

tion to alterity, to the other as other, is however that of responsibility: it includes the paradox of simultaneously affirming distance and proximity, similarity and difference. Thus, in Levinas' view, ethics begins with the face of the other calling from a height, while in Buber's understanding it begins in the realm of the between (Gordon 2004: 99–100). By commencing from the relationship, thus, Buber places emphasis on the interplay between similarities and differences. Both are essential elements of dialogue, formed by the parallel strategies of identification and separation. Understanding, thus, needs not be built merely on similarity. Nevertheless, our human situation is based on a shared experience of 'anguish and expectation' (Buber 2002: 9), acknowledging the human situation as uncertain and incomplete, but interpersonal and conditioned by the same extreme limits of death, life, love and justice. Thus, one can conclude Buber's argument: the interplay between difference and similarity is always played out against the background of a common humanity.

In Raimond Gaita's interpretation, common humanity implies a moral fellowship where all people are allotted an equal status as moral agents (Gaita 2002: 282). Within the Abrahamic traditions, this perspective is rooted in the belief that God created every human being in his image. Affirming the humanity of all in their sacredness as beings 'created of a single soul' (following the Qur'anic expression) is intrinsic to such a religious understanding (Afsaruddin 2007: 394). Abraham Joshua Heschel formulates this legacy as 'the kinship of being human' and 'solidarity of being' (Heschel 2000: 312). In dialogue, the conceptual space of common humanity needs to be individualised in a concrete affirmation of unique counterparts. The connection between alterity, to return to Levinas' terminology, and common humanity is thus an ethics of heteronomy where I—as a subject part of a specific context as well as a broader common humanity—am irreplaceably responsible for a Thou (Gordon 2004: 110).

To grasp the complex nature of similarity and difference, alterity and common humanity, in interreligious dialogue, I believe Buber's concept of the between is useful. Andrew Tallon contends that by introducing this interpersonal element and moving the sphere of meaning away from within the self, Buber offers a 'seemingly simple but radically revolutionary' vision of dialogue. Buber challenges us to establish and take seriously the space between persons as a meeting point of similarity and difference—created only in the encounter and impossible to sustain

on one's own. (Tallon 2004: 50.) To its external forms, the between can be a modest space in time: the other may be met in such 'unpretentious yet significant' corners of existence as the glance of a stranger passing by in a busy street (Buber 2002: 5).

Creating a space between I and Thou can be understood in relation to what Ludwig Wittgenstein has called 'recognising the humanity in man' (Wittgenstein 1977: 11). This demand is formulated as a moral challenge in every interpersonal encounter: it cuts through every relation to otherness. In dialogue, as Gaita (2002: 34) formulates it, one recognises the other as fully and distinctly another perspective on the world. In other words, dialogue includes discerning the other in her distinctiveness—not just an abstraction, a human being in general—but also revealing one's own face and refraining from reducing the other to a simple tool of our own will or a mere reflection of the self. Consequently, dialogue should neither extinguish nor merge the voices partaking in the discussion, but rather expand them by recognising what David Tracy has called 'similarity-in-difference' (Tracy 1990: 42). The complex unity of same and other captured in this analogy alludes to the intricate interplay included in interpersonal encounters.

In-between and the third space

The effort to come to terms with the intersecting values of integrity and unity in dialogue is an essential ethical and existential challenge (Appiah 2006: xxi). In analyses of dialogue, difference is easily defined negatively, as something unwanted, to be disregarded or even abolished. It is nevertheless crucial to question the view of difference as a simple division into us and them, or as merely a regrettable result of contextual, historical and linguistic chance. Difference is truly there—but not as a problem. In the dialogic process, it is rather a matter of choice which differences one puts emphasis on and forms into unsurpassable obstacles (Deutsch 2004: 101).
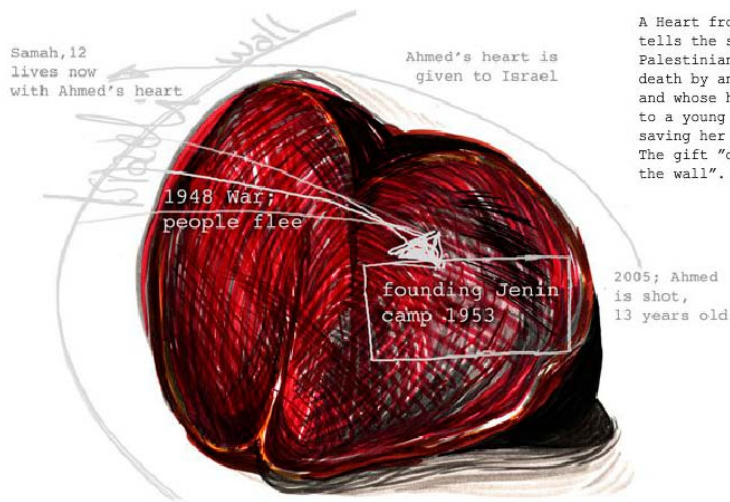
On the topic of difference, Levinas makes the radical claim that the relationship to the other actually is his absence (Levinas 1989: 51 and 1969: 276–7). In the relationship, I meet someone who is tangibly other; a person in his particularity 'which is by no means to be circumscribed by the circle of [my] own self', to use the words of Buber (2002: 27). By belittling the role of difference, Gaita argues in a similar vein, we eliminate the possibility of 'astonishment at alterity, at otherness, at how other than and other to

oneself another human being can be' (Gaita 2002: 272). Hence, coming to terms with difference is not just a question of tolerating perceived obscurities in the other, or rendering their difference intelligible. Rather, it includes cultivating the capacity to see multiple identities in the self, to live comfortably within these unique boundaries and to reach out beyond them when needed (Gopin 2005: 55–6).

As shown above, Buber's interpersonal ethics are characterised by the emphasis on difference combined with the view that one becomes fully human only in relation to another, that is, in dialogue: 'living means being addressed' (Buber 2002: 12). It is only in relation to the other that one can truly become an I, as it is only against the background of a shared language we can talk of finding one's own voice. Thus, the dimension that essentially makes us human is the space between I and Thou, which neither party is totally in control of, but which is given life only through dialogue (Illman 2010: 27).

In my interpretation, Buber's realm of the between can be meaningfully illuminated by the concept of the *third space*, introduced by Homi K. Bhabha. The third space is a location necessary for the production of meaning, Bhabha declares, but it is possessed and dominated neither by the self nor by the other. Instead it constitutes a fundamentally 'shared space' where the flow between different realms of meaning and being are interconnected and shared between autonomous yet interdependent subjects. Thus, this third space introduces an inevitable aspect of ambivalence, openness and fluidity into the act of interpretation, as it is controlled neither by the one nor the other (Bhabha 2004: 5, 53). Indeed, the binary distinction between self and other as such is challenged in this space. In the words of Brent C. Davis, the 'third space refers to the place where identity is not a given, but negotiated and enacted in the context of difference . . . a place of hybridity and liminality; a place of change and transformation' (Davis 2007: 396).

In Bhabha's writing, the third space is developed within a post-colonial discourse as a strategy for dismantling all claims to cultural purity, solidity and hierarchic perceptions. By exploring this third space where difference loses its fixed character, the traditional borders between self and other and the powerful politics of polarity can be challenged. To avoid constituting the third as yet another fixed and normative space in dialogue, however, it is important to maintain its inherent hybridity. The third, hence, is not comprised of two original, 'genuine' moments out of which the third emerges (Vinzent 2010: 30).

Samah, 12
lives now
with Ahmed's heart

1948 War;
people flee

founding Jenin
camp 1953

Ahmed's heart is
given to Israel

2005; Ahmed
is shot,
13 years old

A Heart from Jenin
tells the story of a young
Palestinian boy shot to
death by an Israeli soldier
and whose heart was donated
to a young Israeli girl,
saving her life.
The gift "drills a hole in
the wall".

Cover image of Cecilia Parsberg's project 'A Heart from Jenin'.

an absolute reality. In my interpretation, the question of difference as a negotiation in the third space underlines the moral character of dialogue. Difference continues to prevail, but a renewed understanding may facilitate the presence of the other as a human being rather than as a logical shortcoming of a unison unequivocal religious narrative (Light 2009: 73).

In a passage closely resembling the formulations of Buber, Bhabha writes: 'it is the "inter"—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture' (Bhabha 2004: 56).

In dialogue research, I propose, third space discourses can be applied to unsettle essentialist understandings of the religiously plural context. Even if Bhabha does not address religion explicitly, but rather writes of cultural and societal differences, the concept of the third space can convey the complexity of interreligious understanding in a meaningful way (Vinzent 2010: 47). I regard it as a way of extending the discussion on difference beyond the dualistic option of either/or. By incorporating the in-between into perceptions of dialogue, an interpersonal connection can be imagined that is not accomplished *through* identity but *despite* difference (Appiah 2006: 135). The third space can be envisioned not only as a space where cultural power structures are exposed, but as space where the ambiguity of the in-between is apprehended as an open-ended playfulness and creative interaction, enabling transformative interpersonal meaning-making. An advantage of this formulation is its potential to enable differences to mutually transform each other without reaching any final fusion. The dialogic encounter can hence be understood as a third space in which 'multiplicity, relationality, and creativity are in motion to regenerate one another' (Wang 2007: 390). By admitting the possibility of a non-binary world where different shades of existence coexist, we may also gain a new understanding of the so-called 'problem of difference' as a result of one-sided structures of thought, rather than

The balance between separateness and unity, unique individuality and shared community, and the responsibility connected to such balancing, forms a central axis around which much of the contemporary critical research on dialogue circles. Aimee Upjohn Light stresses the necessity to stop thinking in dual categories about the religious other. In a binary discourse of similar or different, true or false, difference 'must always be identified as a lack', she contends. Hence, there is a need for exploring the creative ruptures in the traditional, rationally black-and-white, dialogue canopy created by non-binary ways of approaching the subject. (Light 2009: 71–2.) 'The question of the religious other' can hence be regarded not as a problem to be solved but as a relationship to be explored. Shifting attention from religion to religious and from objects to subjects in the analysis can facilitate a theoretically and ethically more nuanced account (Barnes 2005: 417–18).

Art as a material dialogic arena
In the empirical material gathered for the current research project, art is often given the function described above as the third space of dialogue—the interpersonal and reciprocal in- between. All six artists interviewed for the study think and talk about dialogue as a broad notion of human interaction, including formative elements from the past (theologies, institutions and practices, history and politics), as well as creative elements of individual interpretation and understanding (including encounters, emotions and attitudes). Taken together, these elements shape dialogue into a dynamic phenomenon, constantly

transforming itself according to time, place and subjectivities. Furthermore, all artists make positive assessments of difference and point to the creative potential included in human diversity, especially for art. Thus, all of them regard practical and ethical aspects as quintessential to the practice of dialogue. The writer Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, for example, posits complexity as the core of his personal and professional ethics:

> I am obsessed with complexity! For me, it is a mistake to desire a simple solution, a simple truth, a unique algebraist formula. It's terrible because it's impossible. You have to fight against this obsession of simple ideas in order to accept complexity.

By focusing on human complexity in his narratives, Schmitt strives to underline that our identities in the end are the results of pure hazard; of historical coincidences, social patterns and chance. A fixed and stable identity—uniting us with some who share our identity and separating us from others who are different—is fiction. The human way to survive is, he claims, to accept the complexity of our interpersonal

Mats Lillhannus

Jordi Savall

world, to live in awareness of our need for a stable identity, but simultaneously acknowledge the fragility of all such boundaries. The visual artist Cecilia Parsberg, to give another example, states that 'difference is a valuable asset' and underlines that everyone is different in some respect. Therefore the entire dichotomy of similarity and difference must be questioned. Is there anyone who is similar to me, she asks; and is there a need for similarity?

> If I consider myself to be similar to someone else, then I become static. I create myself in the encounter—there, similarity and difference do not exist. . . . When we meet, we create something together. Then I become different from what I was before. How can I then say similar or different?

If I constantly create and recreate my identity in encountering others, who am I then, Parsberg asks? If I want to change the limits and norms of my society I must change myself as well. Therefore, difference is not a static fact separating human beings into monolithic groups; homogeneous systems of value are redundant; cultural and religious purity is a paradox. The views of difference presented by Schmitt and Parsberg can be illuminated by the notion of similarity-in-difference presented above. It is a question of constantly changing lines of identification and estrangement, drawn and redrawn in our minds, words and actions as we encounter and enter into dialogue with others. Even though the artists engage in different art forms, come from different religious backgrounds and position themselves towards personal religiosity in different ways, they share the idea of art as an open, interpersonal forum for dialogue between persons of different religious backgrounds and sentiments. For them, art can provide a scene for dialogue where the ideals of similarity-in-difference can be enacted and where the dynamics of third-space-thinking can be implemented. In this context, thus, art becomes a tangible space of the between.

The conductor Jordi Savall uses a metaphor to explain the ethical and practical visions of creative dialogue that inspired him to realise the interreligious concert project *Jerusalem*. To him, a profession in music is the best training available for interreligious dialogue, as it teaches you to listen and to respect difference. 'As a musician, the first thing you have to learn is dialogue' he states. You cannot make music together with someone whom you do not feel sympathy and friendship for. You must tune your instru-

ments together and play in the same tempo—but still you play different instruments in your own personal way. Thus autonomy and dependence are intertwined in Savall's vision of dialogue: we are all different, but through music we can communicate without losing our individuality. Neither difference nor similarity are seen as essential qualities, but as far ends of a common relational scale where the musical journey between them counts as creative dialogue in practice.

Savall also strongly points out that music and other art forms can bring inspiring elements to dialogue. In its own way, art can give expression to the inexpressible and make us sensible to the 'artistic and spiritual value of the intangible'. Art is not bound to the spoken word, exact definitions and rationality. Instead, art can invite all the senses, taking the dialogue to a higher dimension, which Savall calls spiritual. Music goes directly to our hearts, he believes, and therefore we cannot tell lies with music as we can with words. In Savall's context, the challenge of honouring similarity-in-difference involves respecting difference and letting everybody keep their own unique voice: sharing but not mixing. In the interreligious dialogue between musicians, everyone should be allowed to use her or his own style.

Savall's reluctance with respect to crossover, mixing and fusing traditions is thought-provoking. Voices are like human beings, he claims: no two are alike and they may attract or repel in ways we cannot foresee. The challenge of dialogue, in Savall's view, lies in finding a prolific balance between bonding and autonomy: to create a space where the participants can feel united with each other, but at the same time find a space to express their unique individuality. Savall uses the notion of 'a dialogue of souls' to describe the interpersonal space created between persons who meet in dialogue: a shared and interdependent space where difference can be reassessed, transformed but yet preserved, in creative conversation. According to him, music can provide such an interpersonal dialogue arena, saturated by the qualities of a creative third space.

For the writer and teacher Susanne Levin, literature has given tangible form to the dialogic third space. Levin's motivation to write autobiographically inspired novels about interreligious encounters and estrangement was triggered by her encounter with racist and anti-Semitic sentiments in the school where she works. 'There', she says, 'I saw all those children they want to exclude in order to "keep Sweden Swedish"', all those frightened and silenced immigrant children who reminded her of herself as a young girl, the

Susanne Levin

daughter of an Auschwitz survivor, who did not fit in: wrong hair colour, wrong family name, wrong religion. Levin frequently uses her novels when she teaches religion in multi-religious school classes. She is convinced that novels can reach out to young people, awaken their empathic abilities and create a respectful understanding of difference more effectively than theoretical texts:

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

Theoretical texts may seem distant in their abstract language; films and television flood your mind with images, impressions and ideas. Novels, on the other hand, can offer a more adequate quantity of expressive elements for the mind to take in and contemplate, Levin reflects. As a teacher, she strives to open the eyes of her students to the joys, richness and beauty to be found in literature. By using her own texts she can initiate discussions on a personal level and thus give the pupils 'tools for life' in a world of religious pluralism and cultural change. The roles of teacher and writer are nevertheless different, Levin says: as a teacher she must strive towards impartiality and balance, as a writer she can be unreservedly subjective and depict the world in a creative way as she sees it

from her personal perspective. Both as a teacher and as a writer, however, Levin experiences an ethical responsibility to contribute to understanding and respect. By writing fiction, hence, Levin has developed a contemplative attitude, which is refined through the existential discussions in her school classes, making it possible for the dialogue partners to hold on to their own self-worth while simultaneously recognising the worth of what is experienced as other.

Enabling a multiplicity of voices

Multimedia artist Marita Liulia has contributed to the discussion on interreligious relations and art in her project *Choosing My Religion*: a multilayered and complex journey into nine world religions presented side by side in paintings, photographs, media installations, films, artefacts, texts and interactive websites. By presenting her art in several different formats, Liulia strives to invoke a reaction in her audience. Through reading, regarding, listening and contributing the spectators become participants, engaged in the art as if they were 'drawn into a seductive play' where you constantly must ask yourself: What do

Marita Liulia

I think about all this? What do I find meaningful? Liulia wants to urge the visitor to 'try things out, stop, think and imagine'; she offers no definite interpretations or unequivocal answers and therefore compels the viewers to actively situate themselves in the range of spiritual possibilities. In her view, creative expressions that try to capture the mystery lend depth and meaning to facts of history and theology and vice versa. Understanding is the result of combining factual and creative elements. Liulia's personal worldview is thoroughly atheist and she regards religion as an intrinsically human phenomenon, restricted by the same everyday banalities and rules of personal chemistry as any other human interaction. Above all, she states, religions 'talk about people, about their at-

tempts to come to terms with themselves and with others'. To comprehend religions, therefore, you cannot content yourself with simply studying them in literature—you also need a strong dose of real-life controversy and complexity:

> In fact, religions can't be comprehended at all simply by reading holy books. You don't understand human beings by reading them. If you try to get to know Christians by reading the Bible, you get lost. This goes for all religions. . . . There's always the need for interaction.

Truth claims and theologies are therefore of minor interest to Liulia as she deals with interreligious dialogue in her art. Rather, she is guided by the key words beauty and wisdom, that to her represent the most appealing and advantageous aspects of religions. Liulia regards the myths inherent in traditional religious stories as the most valuable contribution to dialogue religions can offer. By regarding religion as a form of literature, that is, narratives incorporating 'a solid dose of the life wisdom of countless generations', the stories can be reread, rediscovered and reinterpreted by new generations in new times. What primarily interests Liulia in dialogue is neither religion nor ethnicity, but the presence of the other: 'What is this person like, here and now? How does she look at me, how does she respond to my smile? Sometimes, you don't even have to speak.' The parallels to Wittgenstein's ethical position of discerning humanity in man are salient in this quotation. To Liulia, however, this is not a deliberate ethical choice, but simply her way of being.

In contrast to Liulia's position, personal religiosity is a fundamental inspiration for the musician Chokri Mensi. He feels a significant responsibility for creating spaces for dialogue and he is certain that music can reach over all lines of religious and cultural difference. As a muezzin, Mensi has performed the

Chokri Mensi

Muslim prayer call in several Christian churches in Sweden—during interreligious services, concerts and conferences—and is deeply moved by the effects his song has on believers of other confessions. Music, he believes, can clear the way to the religious other, help people come close and experience unity. Music also invokes the spiritual dimensions of reality, he claims: it is truly the voice of God one encounters in music. Therefore, spiritual aspects are central to creative interreligious dialogue. 'To me', he says, 'music is a fruitful method for building bridges; it is a creative way of mediating the message of understanding and respect "when language is not enough" '. Using similar formulations as Savall, Mensi claims that music is the universal language of the soul that exceeds all boundaries between human beings and 'fills their emptiness' with meaning and unity. Therefore, music can reach the hearts of people, creating a spirit of involvement.

> Music is a language that everyone knows, a language that doesn't relate to physical dimensions, but to spiritual ones. It's a language that knows no boundaries . . . You can't put your finger on it, it's something abstract, but it fills an important function and makes us feel at home.

For Mensi, thus, music and art in general appear as creative channels for communicating with the religious other, spreading the message of peace like rings on the water. 'For me,' he declares, 'music is an opening toward the other: 'a tiny door I can open and say "Hello" so that perhaps someone will hear my voice and respond, "yes, come on in" '. Nevertheless, Mensi concludes, creative forms of communication are merely one type of dialogue—one form of the third space among others.

Also in the case of visual artist Cecilia Parsberg, the concepts of the third space and the between can be applied to the concrete situation of creating art. Her creative inspiration comes from the interpersonal realm; the meeting between herself as an artist and the subjects of her art, where dimensions of difference and power can be visualised and negotiated. 'It's all about encounters, what I do; and power'. She summarises her way of working with the documentary film *A Heart from Jenin*[5] depicting an interreligious heart transplant. Her aim is to invite the other into the process of creating an artistic representation—a creative partnership. The aspect of power refers to the advantage she has as a professional artist and initiator. Learning to 'take care of' her power in a responsible way is therefore important to Parsberg, who frequently applies the term dialogue as a description of her artistry. By engaging in dialogue with the other,

5   The film is accessible on the Internet: http://this.is/parsberg/heart_fr_Je/index.html.

Parsberg claims, the creative process becomes a form of co-operation where 'we create something together, something neither of us could have done on our own'. In the trusting encounter between the artist and her subject, something is created in the space in-between the dialogue partners, as in Buber's description.

The author Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, finally, has reached a world-wide audience with his symbolically dense and humorous tales of encounters between persons of different cultures, religions and ages, especially through the collection of novellas called *Le Cycle de l'Invisible*. Literature, to him, is the sense of complexity: its purpose is to legitimate different perspectives. Thus, he claims: 'The purpose is not: What is true? The purpose is: How is it possible to live together?' Therefore, novels can be helpful in creating awareness of the necessity of a pluralistic humanity. The wish to express complexity in his writing was one of the reasons why Schmitt abandoned his academic career to become a writer of fiction. 'Philosophy strives to simplify the world; literature makes it even more complex,' he asserts. Another reason was the wish to include emotions in his texts. 'The leap from fact to fiction is not, however, that great, because intellectual life is always connected to emotions,' he concludes; 'an intellectual without feelings is an ab-stract man, and philosophy abstracted of emotion is pure craziness.'

Feelings often mark the beginning of an intellectual journey, Schmitt believes, because 'you have to think inside life, inside your body, with your emotions.' This is where art becomes important to inter-religious dialogue: by telling a fictive but engaging story you can give your readers access to the religious other in a fresh and enriching way: 'It has to be incarnated; it has to be flesh and blood and feelings.' By including emotions, literature can be more effective than rational arguments: it describes encounters of human beings rather than purely academic speculations. It creates wisdom instead of simple knowledge. 'Art is useful for life', he also claims: 'it makes us able to live together. Through art we may catch a glimpse of the indiscernible and discover a world where the shared vulnerability and interdependence of humanity replaces our individual selves as the central axis. Art is an invented world, but it is nevertheless *our* world,' Schmitt claims: a shared space of harmony and beauty, 'beside nature, . . . beyond Christianity, Judaism; independent of religion'.

In the theoretical outline given above it was claimed that difference is a fundamental feature of dialogue, but that dialogue nevertheless needs to be understood within the frame of a common humanity. This central point is also supported by the artists in their argumentations. The notion of a common humanity is given a religious connotation by some—but not all—of them. Levin and Mensi tie it to the Abrahamic framework of human beings as God's intrinsically good creation; 'The unlimited value of the human being' is a core idea in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Levin reminds us. Others refer to the idea at a more unspecified, spiritually saturated level: Savall using the metaphor of a 'dialogue of souls', Parsberg claiming that 'mercy is for all' and Schmitt describing a spiritual unity where 'the other is just one possible me with another story'. Liulia regards common humanity from an immanent perspective: in every culture, she claims, the artists' visions of divine beauty are inspired by the faces of their loved ones. Nevertheless, what unites the otherwise rather different apprehensions of common humanity is, in my opinion, the acknowledgement of similarity-in-difference. The artists do not claim that human beings are all the same deep down, thus undermining the legitimacy of genuine difference, but neither do they regard such differences as obstacles to sincere and respectful community. Difference prevails while common humanity flourishes.

Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt

Conclusion

This paper has presented some critical remarks on a number of underlying presumptions colouring much contemporary research on dialogue: firstly, the one-sided view of dialogue as a rational endeavour and, secondly, the conception that difference is a problem to be solved, or at least, levelled within the context of interreligious encounters. Quite to the contrary, it is claimed, dialogue needs to be assessed as a complex interpersonal relationship and difference as a necessary condition for dialogue: a source of creative complexity, to be carefully preserved. Instead of rendering religious difference harmless by means of dialogue, hence, difference can be acknowledged and explored. The concept of the third space was introduced to enable critical discussion and renewed understanding of this topic, based on Martin Buber's philosophy. The notion of similarity-in-difference was borrowed from David Tracy to describe the dynamic interplay between same and other, identity and separateness in dialogue. By combining distance and relation, to use Buber's concepts, this perspective facilitates the development of a third space within which the positive evaluation of difference as complexity is rendered possible.

As another perspective on the world, the religious other is a person worthy of being taken seriously and feeling responsibility towards. Dialogue, therefore, is a question of interpersonal interaction. However, the fact that all human beings have a share in an abstract common humanity may not be felt as a reason compelling enough to take action for religious others in general. But by regarding Wittgenstein's concept of discerning the humanity in another person as an ethical demand, it also becomes concrete and contextualised. Encountering strangers always means encountering particular strangers; a person is not just a specimen of the human species, but of 'all of humanity in one' (Heschel 2000: 312). Creative interreligious dialogue hence includes a dynamic and action-oriented element. It can be described as a continuous striving to renew one's active, reflective presence in this sphere of the between, that interpersonal third space, constituted by similarity-in-difference.

The analysis of the empirical material revealed a similar attitude towards difference among all six artists: for them, complexity appeared as a word with positive connotations and creative potential. Furthermore, reflections on the role of art as a tangible form of third space in interreligious dialogue were analysed. The analysis showed that art can assist the delicate balancing between identification and integrity by implementing the notion of similarity-in-difference. In the interviews, this notion materialised as a question of constantly changing lines of identification and estrangement, drawn and redrawn in minds, words and actions. Engaged as they are in artistic forms of dialogue, it is no surprise that the artists regarded creativity as a significant contribution to dialogue. Most of them did however emphasise the need to combine several forms of dialogue. As such, they did not regard art as the one and only viable route to genuine dialogue, but rather regarded it as a complement to other kinds of initiatives. Furthermore, the focus on the creative elements and spiritual contents of dialogue need not exclude intellectual aspects: many of the artists were thoroughly familiar with contemporary scholarly discussions on dialogue and implemented philosophy and theology in their perspectives on dialogue. As such, I do not regard the emphasis on creativity as an anti-intellectual element in the empirical material. Quite to the contrary: philosophy and practical, aesthetic expression seem to nurture each other in the creative approaches described in this study. By tapping their own resources of imagination and by making use of the imaginative platform of art, their approaches to dialogue exemplifies an 'ethics of otherness' (Braidotti 2008, 19) that values reciprocity beyond the simple recognition of sameness. ∎

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