

'We' and 'They': Cross-Cultural Conversations on Identity

with Anindita N. Balslev, "'We' and 'They': Why Must We Engage in Cross-Cultural Conversation?"; Carolyn J. Love, "Complex Identity: Genes to God"; Andrew B. Newberg, "Identity and the Brain: The Biological Basis of Our Self"; and John Calvin Chatlos, "Adolescent Identity Formation versus Spiritual Transformation."

“WE’ AND ‘THEY’”: WHY MUST WE ENGAGE IN CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATION?

by Anindita N. Balslev

Abstract. This article contains the principal ideas that I presented in four different sessions at the IRAS 2022 conference, on the theme “We’ and ‘They’: Cross-Cultural Conversation on Identity.” Focusing on the central topic, the article begins with (i) the contents of my opening lecture; followed by (ii) a broad outline of the concerns discussed in my book, *Cross-Cultural Conversation: A New Way of Learning*, intertwined with glimpses of the intellectual journey that led me to CCC, delivered in the Book-discussion session; (iii) a summary of the main ideas about the importance of meeting of religions today, which formed the background for the CCC Panel discussion on religion, where I was in conversation with spokespersons of five world religions; and (iv) my comments on how science–religion dialogue can help promote a sense for human solidarity by combining knowledge with wisdom, in the concluding session.

Keywords: boundary; conversation; cross-cultural; human solidarity; knowledge as power; multiple identities; social identity; uses of technology; wisdom and science–religion dialogue

CCC ON THE “WE’ AND ‘THEY’” DIVIDE

Given that the theme of the IRAS 2022 conference is “We’ and ‘They’: Cross-Cultural Conversation on Identity,” let me at the outset focus on the idea of CCC, which is an abbreviation for “Cross Cultural Conversation.”

Right from the very inception of the CCC venture that I initiated in the mid-nineties, I have used it as an umbrella term. As I have said elsewhere, “CCC” does not designate exclusively a conversation between huge

Dr. Anindita N. Balslev is the Founder of the Forum CCC (Cross-Cultural Conversation), India and Denmark; e-mail: aninditabalslev@hotmail.com.

aggregates of cultures for which the conventional practice is to use such nomenclatures as East and West. CCC as a forum/a program seeks an open exchange between diverse groups and subgroups that are located in the center and periphery of any societal scenario concerning issues that affect our collective life. Naturally, this conversation makes room for a variety of topics, including cultural attitudes and social practices of various communities—some of which are sanctioned by existing institutions and supported by academic theoretical discourses—as well as the controversies that surface regarding these. It can be, for instance, about representations of prevalent thought traditions, be that scientific, religious, or philosophical, and the need for bringing some of these readings together when the concerns intersect. Discussions on diverse forms of social identities that create asymmetries and polarities form an important part of this conversation. Evidently, there are many other issues.

We are living in a time when the nation-state system of governance is preponderant in the global political setting, where we routinely watch how the “‘We’ and ‘They’” divide is played out in the name of national identity. While partaking in this political scenario, it is worth recalling that this system of governance is not even three hundred years old—as pointed out by Ernest Gellner (1983), who also observed that “Culture and social organization are universal and perennial. States and nationalisms are not. This is an absolutely central and supremely important fact.”

One significant feature of the contemporary global scene seems to be the formidable effort on the part of the nation-states to adopt advanced scientific technology—each to its optimal capacity—to secure “a better future” for their respective citizens. However, a strict adherence to the nation-state political system combined with unequal technological capabilities have created a complex situation. Adding to that, we are becoming keenly aware of how advanced scientific technology can be channelized for both constructive and destructive purposes. Consequently, on the one hand, we find that we are moving toward an increasingly interconnected world with unprecedented possibilities for ameliorating the quality of our collective life and on the other hand, it is becoming poignantly evident that unless we work in collaboration toward a change of mind-set matching with our current capabilities, there is severe danger from a radicalization of the “‘We’ and ‘They’” divide on many fronts, be that within or among the nation-states. This would inevitably cause what Konrad Lorenz had described as “intra-specific damages,” that is, destructive behavior toward members of the same species. He had already observed half-a-century ago in his well-known book *On Aggression* ([1963] 1966) that “With humanity in its present cultural and technological situation, we have good reason to consider intra-specific aggression the greatest of all dangers.”

Not that this is a new piece of information for us today, yet still we need to talk about why collective action lingers behind. Looking at the

remarkable progress that has been achieved in terms of travel and communication and given the opportunities that we have today for considerable betterment in terms of human interrelationships, is it not surprising that there has not been some seriously significant alteration to the global cultural landscape so that we could cease to be socially as disjoint as we still are? It is high time to take note of the fact that the ability to crisscross the globe does not automatically make us better equipped to cope with the long range of intricate issues that confront us at multiple levels of social transactions; nor does it enable us to deal with predictable clashes and conflicts of various forms by providing the instruments for empowering our global institutions that seem to remain, by and large, dysfunctional.

It is time to ask what kind of cultural work that must be done in collaboration in order to bring about a change of mind-set. How do we mobilize a collective political will in this direction, so that we may begin to probe into our unexamined assumptions and shed off some of our prejudices about the “otherness” of the other—some of which most of us have—be that in the context of nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, religion or any other?

Cross Cultural Conversation is called for precisely to give a new direction to the dynamics between “the self and the other.”

A scrutiny of current inter-group behavior shows that we badly need open conversational settings in the public space, where it is feasible to speak “with” each other on issues that could be of theoretical or of practical concern. No doubt, top-down injunctions from executive or legal authorities or from religious institutions can be helpful yet it is not enough. Public involvement and engagement are crucial for attaining socio-cultural transformation. Therefore, gatherings of people like the present one at IRAS is more important than you would generally think.

No doubt that the existing educational channels can do much in response to contemporary challenges, if educational offerings could be geared with that intention, but often politics of knowledge seems to intervene. Hence, it is likely to be more fruitful if conversational partners in a CCC Forum come not only from within but also outside of the academia. It is as vital to have relevant inputs into the discussion from those with background in multiple disciplines, as from the experiences of those who come from other walks of life.

Let me elaborate a bit more on the idea of CCC. If it is asked, what is it that we are seeking “to cross” by engaging in this cross-cultural endeavor and whom do we expect to meet on the other side, the answer lies in becoming aware of the “we” and “they” categories that seem to incessantly appear in multiple socio-historical contexts within public discourse. These “‘We’ and ‘They’” categories almost always imply—overtly or covertly—*a sense of boundary*. There are, indeed, many criteria that are employed for

the sake of forming groups and subgroups, along the lines of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and many more. Indeed, we keep inventing new criteria for doing this for various cultural purposes. For example, I may mean by “We,” those that are attending the IRAS 2022 conference and as “They,” those who are not. There is always a boundary line that separates “us” from “them” and I do not see anything wrong with it as such.

However, it is important in this connection to note that “*boundary*” is only a metaphor—a metaphor that can be used both in a “soft” and a “hard” sense. The soft sense of the metaphor indicates that there is a border that enables us to speak of our own “distinctness” by distinguishing it from “others,” it allows us to recognize and validate diversity and differences.

The metaphor of boundary in its “hard” sense is not just that, it implies a barrier where crossing is, as it were, trespassing. All nation-states, for example, have such hard boundaries. We need permission to enter the territory of a different nation-state. We also read about cases when a given nation-state denies having any legal or moral responsibility toward those who desperately look for help after being driven out from their territory—could be due to hunger, persecution, threat of war or whatever—a sad scenario for trespassing a hard boundary drawn in the name of national identity. The point of this example here is to demonstrate the way hard boundaries actually work, and also to suggest that we need more conversation about the possibility of erecting our political institutions so that these do not so blatantly clash with human values.

“Cross Cultural Conversation” is to be treated as a project that seeks greater participation with view to redesign and ameliorate human interrelationships in multiple contexts. The goal of CCC is not to homogenize or impose without consent any culture-form on the “other” but to validate and respect cultural diversity, with the intent to explore how to promote a sense of human solidarity.

Indeed, if “we” dare to engage each other in an open conversation, “we” can better serve the interest of various forms of social identities and in the process innovate social structures befitting the present state of human civilization. It seems to me that this may well turn out not only to be “a new way of learning” regarding how to discern and address some of our common concerns, conceptual or practical, but also for that of “unlearning” some of our prejudices, be that in the context of race, religion, gender, and so forth. CCC on the inter-relationship between science and religion has assumed special significance in our time precisely because there are profound ethical challenges associated with our newly obtained technological capabilities.

It is time to openly wonder about why there is no dearth of political will to channelize enormous resources—both intellectual and economic—for serving the cause of violence and extreme radicalization of the “‘We’ and

“They” divide on so many fronts, but so difficult to obtain a tiny fraction of the resources for building those cultural bridges that could interconnect human minds and help obtain a sense for a larger identity, by defining our norms and ideals in consonance with our rising global consciousness?

Let me wrap up the discussion here by asking a question. Given that we seek to cross man-made boundaries that are designed to sustain the “We” and “They” categories with various intents, it may now be asked: Do we become more “cultured” by engaging in cross cultural conversation? My reply is in the affirmative but only if we understand it in the Socratic sense of being “cultured,” that is, when conversation makes one aware of the limits of one’s own knowledge. When that happens, it does not provoke any display of arrogance but inspires a sense of modesty. It is said in the Indian tradition: “vidya dadati vinayam,” that is, knowledge generates humility.

CCC as a project aspires to bring about a change in mind-set, enabling innovations of new tools of social engagement that would gradually render all hard boundaries redundant.

CCC AS AN INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY AND ITS SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

In this section, let me briefly outline some of the major issues that I have discussed in my book, *Cross-Cultural Conversation: A New Way of Learning* (Balslev 2020). I will combine it with some glimpses from the intellectual journey that led me to the idea of CCC and how in that process I discovered IRAS.

In the very beginning of my book, I have said that my interest in CCC is not merely as an academic project but that it is kindled by my life-experiences, having lived, studied and worked in various countries. However, my focus here will be only on the academic side of the enterprise.

I do not remember the exact year when I was first invited to speak at an IRAS summer conference, organized by Karl Peters and the Late Professor Lawrence Fagg. I recall meeting Professor Fagg sometime earlier in Italy while attending a multidisciplinary international conference devoted to the theme of time. My first book entitled, *A Study of Time in Indian Philosophy* (Balslev [1983] 2020) was then just about to make its first appearance.

What I said in my presentation there has implications for the CCC venture. I observed that no major philosophical tradition has just one view about time but several, and that the same holds true of the history of Indian philosophy as well. As I described to the audience a few of the conceptual models from the Indian sources, I further remarked that it is commonplace *not* to come across any mention of this variety of views or their implications for notions of being and non-being, change and

causality, and so on in relevant literature where attempts are made to situate various thought-traditions in a global framework—be that in history of ideas, in theology or in culture-studies. Instead, one encounters the stereotypical representation that the Indo-Hellenic conceptual world was dominated by a view of cyclic time as opposed to the Judeo-Christian understanding of linear time. I pointed out that granted that the metaphors of cyclicity and linearity are certainly useful while dealing with such notions as those of recurrence and unrepeatability, such metaphorical appellations as characteristic features of different conceptual worlds are misleading. Based on my research, I claimed that a perusal of the available discourse in print shows how the metaphors of cyclicity and linearity gradually cease to be simple time metaphors and get associated with ideas of salvation, of history and of progress. This, I maintained, has created obstacles in the domain of culture studies and blocked the possibility for an authentic encounter of the religions of the world. It was, indeed, astounding for me to find how serious thinkers like Arnold Toynbee, Paul Tillich and others—not out of any mischievous motive but simply due to lack of adequate information—have juxtaposed traditions of thought as if these were diametrically opposed to each other (cf. my article “Time and the Hindu Experience” in Balslev and Mohanty 1993). Indeed, in order to facilitate future conversation among the religious traditions, I took the initiative to invite several scholars representing different world religions to contribute to this volume.

As you see, although I had not coined the umbrella term “CCC” then, I was already led in that direction. Indeed, it was during that period of my life that I first realized, and still continue to hold true, that if public media and educational channels could make us a bit better informed about the philosophico-religious traditions, which play a vital role in shaping cultural and conceptual worlds, it would benefit us all in unexpected ways.

Notice that the longest chapter in my slender book *Cross-Cultural Conversation: A New Way of Learning* (Balslev 2020) is entitled “Living in a multi-religious world in an Age of Science.” There are two sections, one devoted to “Religious Identity and Religious Diversity” and the other to “Science–Religion ‘samvada’ and the Indian Cultural Heritage.” It seems to me that understanding the role that religious identity plays in the context of the presence of religious diversity is as crucially important as the dialogue between science and religion in our time. The former is of significance since we have to deal with the fact that our societies are becoming increasingly multireligious in their demographic composition, and the latter because there are profound ethico-religious challenges associated with our newly obtained technological capabilities.

The idea of CCC, discussed in the previous section, is dealt with in greater detail in the introductory part and chapter one of the book. I

do believe that a genuine cross-cultural involvement with contemporary concerns can eventually bring about significant changes both on conceptual and institutional levels. It can prove to be effective for diminishing the abuse of religious identities in the socio-political arenas of our collective life, just as it may propel new thinking about how to refrain from the employment of scientific technology from serving the cause of violence. The question of encounter of world religions is a major topic for CCC and I will return to this concern in the next section.

Now to go back to the story of my journey to CCC in terms of the next important publication after my book on time, was my exchange with Richard Rorty, the American pragmatist philosopher. This took place between two Philosophy East-West conferences in the beginning of the nineties (Balslev [1991] 1999).

Knowing how valuable it would be to have scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to participate in CCC, I was looking for opportunities. So, I was happy that despite the prevailing politics of knowledge practiced then (also now) in the academia, I could hold the first CCC international conference at Aarhus University, Denmark (cf. Balslev 1996).

Since then a number of CCC international conferences have taken place based on my concept notes, giving rise to several volumes of collected essays that I edited (such as Balslev 2013; Balslev 2014, and several others).

Chapter three of my book is devoted to the theme “Creative Tensions between Nationalism and Globalism.”

We happen to live in an era when, despite all cultural differences, the nation-state form of governance is predominant in the current global political setting. The discussions here focus on various reasons for the extraordinary reception of this idea of nation-state governance around the globe, as well as the inherent limitations of this paradigm for achieving global peace. Views of a few great thinkers from India and the West are referred to in this discussion, highlighting that the tension between nationalism and globalism has not merely political but also ethical dimensions. Today nationalism is a full-fledged political category, whereas globalism is still by and large a moral category, and this provides a crucial challenge to all thinking minds and calls for extensive conversations cross-culturally for transcending the disadvantages entailed in this paradigm. We witness, time and again, situations where global institutions are rendered powerless by national self-interest and how they fail either to prevent or to manage conflicts.

Among the various forms of social identities that divide humanity, such as racial, gender, ethnic, and so on, perhaps the most abominable atrocities committed today are in the name of religious and national identities—topics that are treated in chapters three and four of this book.

I felt all along that if we are to give a new direction to the dynamics of “the self and the other,” CCC is indispensable. We require a readiness

to explore the untapped resources across cultures that can enrich and empower us both on a personal and collective plane. Let there be open conversations about what local and global institutional infrastructures are presently available or can be created, which can help us to restore a balance between knowledge and power and provide us the strength to dismantle some of those old institutional structures that induce negative social attitudes, sanction humiliation, and even killing of others by drawing hard boundaries. We all know that huge amount of intellectual and economic resources are regularly being invested by any number of nation-states complying with the status quo. Why not pause for a moment and reflect on the fact that the biggest threat before us is our already accomplished capabilities for man-made catastrophes that can destroy the entire planet?

CCC is not only a new way of learning about what we did not know before. It also makes us aware that there is a lot of unlearning to be done in order to bring about attitudinal transformation, since wrong doings are not simply due to mistakes that some individuals have done or still do. Looking at the historical canvas, it is easy to discern many of these prejudices and associated practices to be systemic. For addressing this intricate network of issues, we do need to spend some time together as conversational partners. This will give us an opportunity not only to share our hopes and fears as co-travelers in our life's journey but help us to identify our own prejudices—some of which most of us do have—and it also can assist us in getting rid of the same.

It is not that we do not occasionally come across insightful reports and analysis, but such information keeps circulating within small circles, and so far certainly none of their impact has been strong enough to trigger any cultural transformation. Hard boundaries between “We” and “They” affect our collective lives profoundly: they are the fulcrum for justifying divisive policies, for creating social structures that shape and nurture discriminatory social behavior. In the worst-case scenarios, these induce communal riots, ethnic cleansing, racial genocides, war.

Chapter two of this book is about the quest for a larger identity. Here, among other issues, I have tried to draw attention to a commonplace practice that whenever a specific group is targeted in the context of a larger assembly of groups, most often an abstract “otherness” is obtained simply by viewing a group of individuals through a single-identity lens (say, only religious identity) and by underplaying the fact that we all have multiple social identities (such as national, ethnic, etc. that are shared). Occasionally, such practices may be characterized as a beneficial endeavor, since we do find that sometimes leaders indulge in this practice of mono categorization of people with the aim of bringing about a moral resurgence of a specific group, seen as marginalized or as oppressed—be that in the context of gender, race, nationality or any other. However, very often this practice of focusing on single identity is used simply as a divisive tool to the

detriment of “others,” where the “other” is depicted not just as different, but as inferior or even maligned as an enemy.

The last chapter invites the reader to earnestly engage in Cross-cultural Conversation with the intent to imagine a new phase of human civilization, in which the world is not seen merely as a marketplace, or as a battlefield where greed and hegemony set the tone for human interrelationships. This calls for “softening” some of those hard boundaries that often radicalize the “‘We’ and ‘They’” divide and sustain the polarities of the “winners and losers” along the lines of race and religion, nationality, ethnicity, gender, and other criteria of group formations. No doubt that we need more conversation.

However, “Some say that we need to wait for this conversation to take place until the forces that create asymmetries subside, allowing suitable conditions to arise. I do not agree, since I believe that the system that creates polarities and asymmetries also seeks to perpetuate the same” (from my book discussed here). Indeed, “If we wait for the moment when everything, absolutely everything is ready, we shall never begin” (Turgenev [1877] 2014).

“WE” AND “THEY” IN A MULTIRELIGIOUS WORLD

A remarkable feature of the contemporary global scene is the extraordinary mobility—not just mobility of goods and material resources, but of people and ideas across vast geographical distances. People, as they move from one end of the globe to another, carry with them not only their respective regional culinary practices, their art, dance, and music but also their thought traditions—particularly those from which they often derive their sense of primal identities, their norms and guidelines to a series of questions and concerns that inevitably arise in the face of an inescapable death-bound existence—their religious traditions.

Indeed, a common sharing of advanced scientific technology has created a novel situation, especially so in the urban settings around the globe. One noticeable factor, important for present discussion, is the fact that those who earlier were regarded as strangers are today our neighbors. There is a widespread awareness that we are moving toward an “interconnected” world. However, despite that the presence of diversity does not seem to cause much anxiety in many areas of our collective life but rather is often much appreciated, such as in the case of sharing art, music, food, and so on; it is noteworthy that there is somewhere a sense of uneasiness lingering. This is due to some cultural gaps, which are not only acutely felt but are proving to be extraordinarily difficult to bridge. It is critically important, for example, to acknowledge that although we are living in multireligious societies, we still have not found out how to deal with religious diversity

and cope with the various ramifications of the phenomenon of religious identity.

One obvious reason is that our educational channels, by and large, have not been active in this direction, since information about world religions has not been generally considered to be vital. Consequently, very few of us have even basic minimum knowledge about the religions of the world other than those with which we are connected from birth, let alone about the rich cognitive traditions that have been associated with the world-religions for centuries.

It is relevant in this connection to recall the statement of Bryan Hehir here. He says: “There is an assumption that you do not have to understand religion in order to understand the world. You need to understand politics, strategy, economics and law. But you do not need to understand religion. If you look at standard textbooks of international relations or the way we organize our foreign ministry, there is no place where a sophisticated understanding of *religion as a public force* in the world is dealt with” (quoted in Albright 2006).

It is, indeed, crucially urgent to fill this lacuna in our time, given that religious difference has not only been in the past but still is subject to manipulation. Today any such ploy can be particularly harmful for any multireligious society.

Religious identity is a multifaceted phenomenon. Here is a notion of identity, generally associated with one or another religion, which is very often used as a criterion for demarcating humanity into large aggregates. This customary practice does yield a group-formation whose membership may well be much larger in number than what can be obtained, for example, by using the criterion of “nationality.”

It is noteworthy that today while a nation may declare itself to be multireligious, a specific world-religion may also well claim to be transnational since multiple nations can and do share the same religious identity, along with various denominations. No doubt that these have huge impact on various levels of exchanges and transactions—social, economic, political, and legal.

This is of no minor significance in the contemporary global political scene, which is dominated by a “nation-state” system of governance, since this system makes room for on-going immigration of people from one part of the globe to another—people who are bearers of “different religious identities.”

It is highly relevant to take note that despite prevalent antireligious ideologies—often propagated by zealots as a scientific view or as a modern political ideology that is atheistic to its core—most people continue to derive their norms and values from ancient discourses that are handed down from generation to generation. The current president of Religion for Peace said in a recent interview that a survey has shown that eight out of every

ten persons claim to have affiliation with one or another of the religions of the world. These are, obviously, the resources which people consult or turn to when confronted by the challenges pertaining to this-worldly or other-worldly concerns.

To begin with, these are sufficient grounds—and more will come up as we proceed—for considering an open conversation on multiple dimensions of religious identities to be crucially urgent in our time. This would enable us to explore wherein lie the differences and the overlaps in the concerns of these traditions. It seems to me that knowledge of real differences is much less harmful in this regard than imaginary differences.

Conversation with the panelists

There is a range of questions and concerns that can be addressed and discussed in this connection. However, given the time-restrictions, I had the opportunity to focus only on a few, as I conversed with five eminent scholars cum practitioners (panelists were Rabbi David Rosen, Pastor Amy Butler, Lama Losang Samten, Swami Sarvapriyananda, and Mahjabeen Dhala. IRAS video recordings of the session are available).

The four clusters of questions that I shared with them in advance were:

- (a) To elaborate on one key idea that they consider to be distinctive of their respective traditions and say why that deserves the attention not only of the insiders to the tradition but of all humanity.

Again, each panelist, as a representative of his/her specific tradition, was expected to answer how the import of religious identity is to be understood. What is it to be a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew, or a Buddhist?

- (b) Given that the teachings stemming from the religions of the world form a vast pool of cultural resource that has palpable influence on vast populations, our ignorance in this regard is not to be seen as a matter of indifference but rather as something that is driving us to our peril. It is not only historical records of past events but a series of current incidents as well, which show how a stringent employment of the “We” and “They” categories come into play in the name of religious differences having many unfortunate consequences.

Today there are many who hold the view that religions of the world—throughout history—have been related to most cases of fanaticism, dogmatism, fundamentalism, or even terrorism. They insist religions to be at the heart of these problems and not part of the solution for any of these.

The spokespersons of the five traditions were requested to respond to the objections, mentioned above, and say how “otherness” of others is approached and construed in their respective traditions.

(c) Referring to situations when public leaders are seen to view members of a specific group through a single identity lens, ignoring the other shared multiple social identities, it can occasionally be said to be well-intentioned such as when the motive is to uplift the members belonging to a weaker group in the context of race, gender, ethnicity, and so forth (this issue on mono-categorization of people has been discussed in the previous section).

However, historical records show the consequence of such practice to be diabolical when the motive is to inflate only one of the many social identities in order to project “the otherness of the other” as something despicable. A review of records of religious riots—be that between members of two denominations of the same religion or that of two different religions—does show that contending groups of people, even having the same ethnicity, speaking the same language, and so on have inflicted enormous suffering on each other in the name of religious differences alone and that such incidents have taken place innumerable times in history. Today we must be aware of the possibility that an attempt at a reconfiguration of power structures within a multireligious society may be designed by singling out religious identity with malevolent motive.

The question to the panelists in this connection was to express what they thought to be the best way for a multireligious society to prevent such possible abuse of religious identity from taking place.

Furthermore, the panelists were asked whether they considered it to be utterly unrealistic to imagine a new phase of human civilization that would succeed in discarding the hard boundaries that are perpetuating the “We” and “They” divide along the lines of religious identity. If the panelists think that it is not unrealistic, let them say from what they derive this hope, but if they do not entertain that hope, then indicate what they hold to be the principal hindrance for that.

(d) The fourth cluster of questions was: given the differences that are surely there among the world religions—in terms of metaphysics, mythology, iconography, rituals, and so on—is it possible to proclaim that despite these differences there are common values that are recommended by all these traditions? Can the barrier between “We” and “They” in the context of religious diversity be removed if these common values are highlighted and implemented in practice?

This was followed by an interactive period with the audience.

At the end, I observed that those few among us, who respond to the religious dimension of human existence with utter sincerity, do not seem

to want to leave any domain of life untouched by that experience. Their aspiration is to let it permeate through every sector of our lives, not only when we set out on a pilgrimage or go to a temple, a mosque, a church, or a synagogue, but in the way we conduct ourselves in our daily life, relate to others, run business, or even engage in politics. As an example, recall Mahatma Gandhi's famous utterance: Those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics, do not know what religion means.

This session ended with a prayer from each panelist. I recited from the Upanisads: "The shallow-minded say 'this one is a friend, a relative but that one is not' but those who are magnanimous, to them the 'whole world is a family.'"

CCC IN A SCIENCE–RELIGION FORUM

Given that CCC seeks to promote a sense for human solidarity and the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science is the host, a most pertinent question that can be raised in connection with the IRAS 2022 conference is: Can science–religion dialogue help remove prevailing asymmetries that rampage our societies in the name of various social identities? Can it give a new direction to the dynamics between the self and the other? I tend to think that it can do so in many important ways.

Let me begin by making a few preliminary observations about the relevance of science–religion dialogue in our time. Today, if there is a keen awareness about the remarkable progress in scientific pursuits in a range of areas over the past few decades, as well as with regard to how advanced scientific technology has paved the way to a better life and greater well-being for so many of us living on this planet; there is also a shared perception that advanced scientific knowledge and technology play a crucial role in the innovation of lethal weaponries and thereby have enhanced the capacity for inflicting horrendous amount of human suffering. It can even be instrumental toward the destruction of the entire planet.

Hence, although it is almost proverbial to say that "knowledge is power," it seems worthwhile to pay heed to the warning from Russell, who said that "but it is power for evil just as much for good ... It follows that, unless men increase in wisdom as much as in knowledge, increase of knowledge will be increase of sorrow" (Russell [1952] 2016).

Notice the distinction between knowledge and wisdom in the above citation and their specific connotations. This usage of these words is especially significant and must be respected while pursuing science–religion dialogue. Whichever other sources of wisdom there may exist, the fact that religious traditions are our principal wisdom traditions can hardly be doubted. Hence, for science–religion dialogue to be relevant for human society, it is crucially important to abide by the profound insights that these wisdom traditions hold. We need to find a way to resist the actual

and possible abuse of scientific knowledge as “power for evil.” It can be hoped that an increased sensitivity to the lessons from our wisdom traditions can so transform the members of the scientific community that they would refuse to lend support to programs intended for inflicting sorrow and suffering on each other.

Suffering seems to be inescapably ingrained in human conditions. The First Noble Truth of the Buddhist tradition, for example, reminds us that on the physical level, it is there in the form of disease, infirmities of old age, and death; psychologically, it is embedded in all our hankering for what we do not have and in our grieving for what we once had but have now lost and so forth. In fact, religious discourses across cultures try to draw our attention to transitoriness as well as purpose of life, sometimes by asking such rhetorical questions as “How would you choose to live if you knew that today is the last day of your life?” These are the wisdom traditions that speak to us of love, compassion, non-violence, and peace. These provoke us to innovate new ways of thinking and acting so that no part of human suffering would be purposely man-made.

However, most of the incredibly destructive scenarios that we witness are not due to natural catastrophes but happen to be man-made. All the worse, since a lot of intellectual and economic resources are intentionally invested to make these happen. Today a deranged teenager can act as a one-man army, march into a classroom and shoot and kill dozens of children and teachers within minutes because of the sophisticated gun—a piece of technological wonder—that he carries. We see no global institution that can stop a professional army from marching into the territory of a nation-state and wipe out cities in the course of a few days that have taken centuries to come to their present form, while ruthlessly slaughtering men, women, and children with the help of deadly weapons—all invented with the aid of cutting-edge scientific technology, promptly distributed and made readily available for the sake of huge profits. These scenarios are not hypothetical situations born of fantasy; daily news amply corroborate these as accurate descriptions of recent events.

Are we doomed to this unfortunate scenario? Are there no better ways of acting in the face of conflicts? Can we really afford not to pay any attention to what these wisdom traditions recommend and prohibit? As science-religion dialogue attains a more mature stage, it is likely to inspire a quest for a deeper understanding of our common values. It can also be expected that a consolidated endeavor in an open CCC setting might provoke action against any abuse of scientific knowledge as “power for evil.” Indeed, a consolidated effort toward an authentic meeting of world religions could be of great benefit, especially if we could resolve to treat these as our wisdom traditions that have been with us from time immemorial.

After all, we are in many ways more fortunate than our ancestors. We are no longer living in an era when some could proclaim institutional

authority in the name of religion with the view either to control the march of scientific enterprise or to impose any blind acceptance of hideous social custom-based practices; nor are we obliged to listen to those who arrogantly declare that we now live in an age of science where wisdom traditions can at best have only a minor, marginal role. Our cumulative experience over the past many decades shows that for the sake of our collective wellbeing, we need both. I am inclined to believe that the establishment of science-religion forums today are testimony to that shared perception. It engenders a sense of optimism that a new take on the dynamics between “the self and the other” is possible, provided that the conversational partners are determined to remove the prevailing asymmetries.

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