

A Human Communication Approach to Interreligious Dialogue

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Interreligious dialogue schemes based upon different faith traditions exist; however, to chose one scheme over another can generate religious tensions, possible accusations of bias and even event-cum-religion snubbing. One way of circumventing this potential problem is to adopt a generic, non-sectarian model based upon human communication science. The critical literature was reviewed and Taylor et al.'s (1977) classic transactional communication model (TCM) was explicated. This eight-element model comprising of: (1) Source, (2) Stimulus, (3) Receiver, (4) Sensory Receptors, (5) Interpretation/Response, (6) Noise, (7) Feedback and (8) Situation/Context was applied to a hypothetical bi-lateral dialogue to demonstrate its methodological viability. This scientific (re)conceptualisation of dialoguing redefined its constitutive elements, provided new insights into the theoretical foundations of the enterprise, and highlighted important praxis requirements for the design, organisation and running of future events. Further research into this exciting interdisciplinary field was recommended.

Introduction

Many interreligious dialogue schemes abound, whether they be strictly interreligious (e.g., Christianity vs. Buddhism), intrareligious (e.g., Roman Catholicism vs. Protestantism) or interideological (e.g., Christianity vs. Marxism). For example, dialogue imperatives, schemes, models, directions and guidelines have been based upon: **The Patriarch Abraham** (Washington, 1995), **The Bible** (Hesselgrave, 1978), **Christianity** (Ogden, 1994; Peters, 1986), **Jesus Christ** (Cox, 1989), **Judaism** (Fisher, 1990; Lee, 1991; Shapiro, 1989), **Liberation Theology** (Fernandes, 1995), **Melchizedek** (Thomas, 2000), the **Virgin Mary** (Hurley, 2000), **African Religion - Yoruba** (Abimbola, 1989), **Native American Traditions** (Grim, 1985), **Hinduism** (Rambachan, 1987), **Islam** (Ali, 1989), **Jainism** (Jain, 1989), **Sikhism** (Kapoor, 1990), **Zoroastrianism** (Dhalla, 1989), **Buddhism** (Corless, 1990; King, 1990), **Chinese Philosophy** (Fung, 1989), **Confucianism** (Tucker, 1990), **Japanese Religious Traditions** (Keane, 1990), **Shintoism** (Komori, 1989) and **Marxism** (Mojzes, 1978).

These authors have variously claimed, implied or assumed that "better" dialogue can be achieved by adopting their particular religious or ideologically-

based scheme since they all believe that they possess worthwhile truth, if not *the* truth. Indeed, organisations such as the World Council of Churches Interreligious Relations and Dialogue team was purposely founded to promote:

... contact between Christians and neighbours of other faiths primarily through multi-lateral and bi-lateral dialogue with partners of other faiths that is aimed at building trust, meeting common challenges and addressing conflictive and divisive issues... During the past years, the WCC has organised a number of Hindu-Christian, Christian-Muslim, Buddhist-Christian, and Jewish-Christian dialogues at the international and regional levels (World Council of Churches, 2001:1).

Of course, other religions have their own dialogue organisations, event programs and communicological impulses designed to share their faith with the world, but these will not be dealt with here.

Some Dialogue Conference Assumptions

Many styles of dialoguing and invitation tactics exist (Kozlovic, 2002), and the specific qualifications needed by legitimate delegates can be very demanding (Kozlovic, 2001a), especially with complex event configurations. However, for the purposes of this introductory methodological explication, it is temporarily assumed that dialoguing refers to an engagement between two different religions in what technically could be described as an interreligious, bi-lateral, academic, intentional, interpersonal, official, dialogue-of-specialists style of event, and thus consisting of Participant-A from Religion-A dialoguing with Participant-B from Religion-B as graphically represented in Figure 1.

In its minimalist form, a dialogue is conducted between two delegates alone, and so it is assumed herein hereafter. Of course, other event configurations are possible, but such complexity is beyond the scope of this paper. One need only substitute the faith of their choice for Religion-A and Religion-B if a personalised example is needed (e.g., Christians dialoguing with Muslims). However, a variety of traditions will be referred to and their concerns integrated into the text herein as exemplars (albeit, with a strong reportage flavour) to demonstrate the viability, versatility and range of issues associated with the dialogue enterprise, and also the pan-religious nature of the problem.

Some Potential Sources of Interreligious Discord

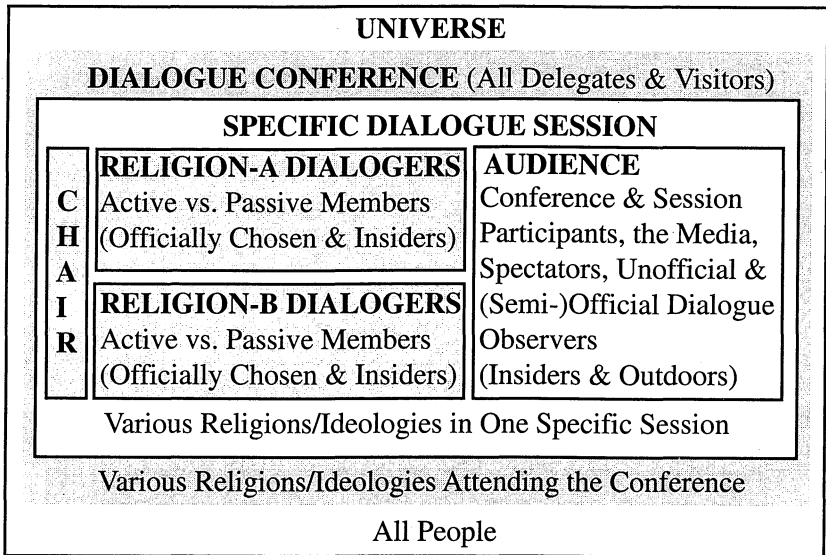
Despite the intrinsic merits of the various above-mentioned dialogue schemes rooted in their unique faith traditions, whenever an official organiser selects one of them to underpin their religious event (whether consciously or unconsciously), it can automatically generate potential discord. For example, how many Christians would be willing to abandon their Christianity and follow Hindu dialogue practices and *vice versa* without a strong twinge of concern? There is scant critical literature documenting the reasons for religions refusing to engage in formal dialogue; but some possible reasons for this reluctance include the fear of contamination, the threat of conversion, or just an uncomfortable perception that it

is somehow unwholesome to engage with the religious Other, especially if conceived as their putative “enemy” or “competitor.”

Therefore, faiths may refuse to cooperate simply because of a perceived bias against their own religion/faith/ideological tradition/preferred dialogue scheme, let alone any substantive arguments about the content of the communication. Any resultant suggestions for adopting the aggrieved faith’s preference (i.e., belief parochialism) may only generate additional concerns from the remaining Others (especially at multi-lateral events), all of whom might legitimately ask: “Why don’t you use our dialogue scheme, especially since you claim respect for our tradition?” Should each tradition vigorously insist upon its own dialogue scheme before engaging the Other, the envisioned conversation may not proceed as concern evolves into offence then into rejection leading to abandonment of both the enterprise and the dissenting faith(s).

Documenting such grievances, the limitations of each dialoguing scheme, and past event failures would be fascinating, as would academic excursions into the definition(s) of “religion,” “dialogue” and their impact upon “interreligious communications,” but this discussion is also beyond the scope of the paper. So, what can be done to avoid this potential rejection scenario and actively encourage dialoguing whilst intrinsically enhancing the potency of the process?

Figure 1: Block Venn Diagram of Bi-Lateral Dialogue Participants and Possible Event Inter-relationships



Active = Engaged member within a team

Passive = Unengaged member within a team

Insider = A representative believer Outside = A person not of the engaged faith

Officially Chosen = Faith approved member

There are ten interactions that the Transactional Communication Model (see Figure 2) can be applied to herein, namely:

1. Between Religion-A and Religion-B with an Audience
2. Between Religion-A and Religion-B without an Audience
3. Within Religion-A's members (if a team)
4. Within Religion-B's members (if in a team)
5. Between Religion-A and the Audience
6. Between Religion-B and the Audience
7. Within the Audience (individually and as groups).
8. Between the Chair and Religion-A
9. Between the Chair and Religion-B
10. Between the Chair and the Audience

For the purposes of this brief explication, it is assumed that interaction possibility No. 2 is in play, and comprising of delegates from Religion-A and Religion-B without a Chair. Of course, this analysis can be greatly complicated if all ten possibilities were taken into account, communication theory-wise.

A Scientific Solution to Avoiding Inherent Dialogue Discord

One strategy for avoiding the type of potential religious discord mentioned above is to premise the whole dialogue enterprise upon a scientific foundation rooted in human communication science. After all, an unavoidable common fact shared by all participants, regardless of their politico-religious orientation, is that they must verbally communicate with one another as human beings. Therefore, it seems eminently logical to start from this basic human reality and design a system that will generate desirable dialogue outcomes while simultaneously avoiding the type of religious discord that scheme selection bias can create. One practical solution to this problem is to adopt the Transactional Communication Model (TCM) and apply it to official interreligious events like those organised by the World Council of Churches (WCC).

Not only is the TCM a transgeneric means of circumventing potential religious discord, but it can also enhance dialogue potency that is only obtainable through the power of scientific rigour. The following is a preliminary conceptual exploration of how human communication science can improve interreligious dialoguing through an intimate understanding of the TCM process. This approach has the potential to turn religious rhetoric into scientific discourse about faith by the faithful for the faithful. It is not a case of “religion” being replaced by “science” but rather “science” serving “religion” by side-stepping potential religious impediments. After all, who could seriously claim that improving communication, understanding and religious discourse between world faiths is *not* a worthwhile exercise, especially in the troubled times of post-September 11, 2001?

Logically speaking, there may be some people who object to this scientific approach for whatever reason, and it is their right not to participate if desired. However, one would strongly suggest that the cause of their faith, enhanced interreligious relations plus world improvement will be more quickly achieved by taking this more objective, impartial, scientific path than by embracing the limitations of religious centrism. Now is a good time to try something new in this post-Millennial, global communication age, and even if scientific dialogue is not perfect, war is worse!

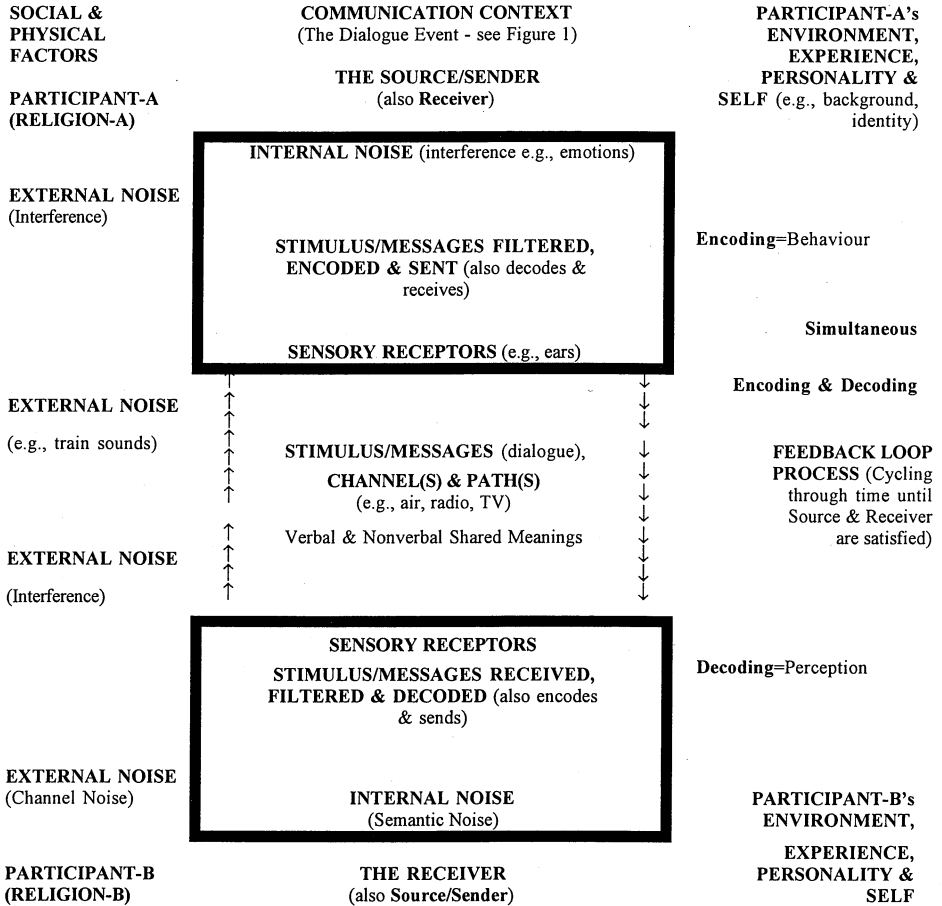
The Transactional Communication Model (TCM) and Interreligious Dialoguing

The TCM belongs to the broad class of communication transmission models which “treats people as machines which have a coded set of information they pass from one to the other” (Lewis and Slade, 1994:9). This information exchange process was analysed and categorised by Western scholars (Taylor *et al.* 1977:5) into what is now a classic model comprising of eight constitutive elements, graphically represented in Figure 2 (with additional author enhancements for ease of understanding).

Of course, more advanced models, systems and communication theories exist (Griffin, 1991) including one engineering attempt to demonstrate God’s communications design of the Bible (Thron, 2002), but the basic TCM was chosen because of its acceptability and pervasiveness within the business world; and also

to demonstrate the general viability of this approach for formal dialoguing which can then be extrapolated into more sophisticated models once its basic feasibility is established. After all, proverbially speaking, one needs to learn to crawl before one can run. Taylor *et al.*'s (1977) communication model will then be considered in relation to a hypothetical bi-lateral dialogue, that is, a minimal event configuration of Figure 1 will be linked to the TCM process described in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The Transactional Communication Model (TCM)



Source: Synthesised from Adler and Rodman (1991:18,19), DeVito (1985:4), Tubbs and Moss (1991:7) and Yoder, Hugenberg and Wallace (1993:12).

The Classic Human Communication Model

The eight elements of Taylor *et al.*'s (1977) TCM comprises of: (1) a Source, (2) Stimulus Received from the Source, (3) a Receiver, (4) Sensory Receptors, (5) the Receiver's Interpretations of and Responses to the Sensations, (6) Noise, (7) Feedback, and (8) a Situation or Context. The following is a brief explication of each of these elements and their potential ramification for dialoguing.

1.0 A Source (Religion-A; Participant-A)

Simply put, one needs human dialoguers meeting together to discuss issues before interreligious dialogue can start (at the bare minimum, a relational dyad). After all:

Dialogue occurs between individual people, not between collectivities. If Jews and Christians are to respect each other's traditions, they must do so on the basis of personal dialogue. That dialogue must begin by each partner taking the other seriously as an individual rather than as a representative of a general type (Breslauer, 1991:120-121).

The necessity of *personal* communication has often been stressed within the critical literature. For example, it has been claimed that: "Dialogue can take place only between people, living people, sharing the conflicts, ambiguities, tragedies, and hopes of human life" (Samartha, 1981:69). In fact, except in "the minds of textbook writers, there is no such thing as Buddhism or Hinduism, or Christianity for that matter. There are only *persons* who think of themselves as Buddhists, Hindus, or Christians" (Cox, 1989:12). Since human communication is unavoidably a people-based enterprise, it should come as no surprise that individual delegates need to take the prime positions in this process, and with a genuine desire to communicate with the religious Other. As James Baesler (1997:9) put it: "At some level of consciousness at least one of the relational beings must have an intent to communicate," but for successful communication to occur in practice, both persons must have this desire and then act responsibly upon it.

Although this Source requirement is self-evident, and at first glance apparently a non-issue, it can have very serious consequences for what has been offered as legitimate interreligious dialogue in the past, particularly concerning the issues of: (a) dead religions; (b) non-religionists and ex-religionists; and (c) the ontological status of imaginary dialogues; all of which has trapped many an unwary critic in the past.

1.1 Source Implications for Dead Religions

Claims for interreligious dialogue between Christianity and a dead religion like Ancient Egyptian Atenism, for example, cannot take place if there is nobody to *legitimately* represent Atenists (as opposed to those knowledgeable about Aten beliefs, such as Egyptologists). The Christian delegate at such a conversation might be able to legitimately comment about some aspects of Aten worship, but if

there is no legitimate Aten follower to respond (because it *is* a dead religion), then there is *no* true Source. Therefore, if there is no true Source, there is no *legitimate* dialoguer, the communication becomes functionally one-sided, and thus no *interreligious* dialogue has actually occurred (as opposed to a discussion about Atenism by a Christian and an interested Egyptologist, and no matter how expert and erudite). It is an embarrassingly obvious point that can be easily overlooked precisely because of its obviousness. As professional dialoguer Paul Mojzes (1989:206) argued: “one cannot speak of the “death” of dialogue...unless one or both of them [religions] should vanish as viable life styles.” This is the case with Atenism which had historically evaporated like the proverbial drop of water in the desert after Pharaoh Akhenaton’s death (Giles, 1970).

Even the ontological status of dead religions, and their modern corollaries, arcane religions, can be problematic as Archbishop Marcello Zago (2000:6) observed concerning the re-emergence of modern Celts, Gauls, old African religions, voodoo and New Age syncretism. Who can legitimately claim to be the rightful heir to these ancient, changing and diverse religious traditions, which no doubt will form the basis of much professional soul searching and pre-dialogue discussion?

1.2 Source Implications for Non-Religionists and Ex-Religionists

Defining the ontological status of the Source has particular importance for the role of non-religionists (i.e., delegates who are not members of the representing faith in the formal dialogue event) and for the role of ex-religionists (i.e., delegates who have officially left the representing faith, such as drop outs and converts to other religions). As James Baesler (1994:64) put it:

A believer, in the religious context, is one who has faith in a particular religious belief(s), while a nonbeliever is one who does not have faith in the particular religious belief(s) advocated by the believer. The non-believer is not necessarily devoid of religious belief, but may have faith in a religious belief(s) that differs from the believer.

Therefore, as with dead religions, the disqualifying exclusion rule applies to them as well. Why? Because:

... it is not sufficient that the dialogue partners discuss a religio-ideological subject... Rather, they must come to the dialogue as persons somehow significantly identified with a religious or ideological community. If I were neither a Christian nor a Marxist, for example, I could not participate as a “partner” in a Christian-Marxist dialogue, though I might listen in, ask some questions of information, and make some helpful comments (Swidler, 1988:13).

Indeed, as “a non-Christian, non-Muslim, it would be inappropriate for an outsider to intrude on that conversation born out of the particular historical and theological needs of those traditions” (Charry, 1988:218). The reason being that an:

Interreligious dialogue is not simply a discussion between people. To be an interreligious dialogue, it is necessary that some of the people in some way represent one religious community and that others of the people in some way represent different religious community. Otherwise no Jews and/or no Christians need be present at a Jewish-Christian dialogue (Samuelson, 1987:239).

Obviously, such a scenario would be absurd, but if it did occur, then logically speaking, a discussion may have occurred, but it cannot be called *legitimate interreligious* dialogue (whatever else it might be and whatever good might come of it).

1.3 Source Implications for Imaginary Dialogues

The ontological status of the Source also has far-reaching implications concerning imaginative dialogues. Of course, acting as if there were a real dialogue going on can legitimately occur, but like the case of non-religionists and ex-religionists, it cannot be called *interreligious* dialogue. This type of situation frequently happens when a devotee of one Christian religion (e.g., Seventh-day Adventists) tries to “explain” the beliefs of another religion (e.g., Roman Catholicism) before their congregation some Sunday morning; the “Catholic” in reality being another Adventist playing the Catholic role. Usually this role is performed with the conscious or unconscious intent of showing how wrong/bad/misguided the Catholics are, and why the Seventh-day Adventists are right/good/correct. It is essentially a faith confirming exercise offered as dialogue-cum-religious education or faith instruction. For true education to occur, what is needed are *real* members of the religious Other, not sham members. In short, the Source criterion needs to be fully satisfied before one can legitimately move to the next stage in the human communication cycle, namely, message transmission.

2.0 Stimulus Emanating from the Source: The Message

Not only must there be a real Source, but also a real Stimulus (i.e., the message) emanating from that Source. The mere presence of the religion’s representative without them contributing some overt, verifiable Stimulus to the discussion, even at an officially sanctioned dialogue event, is *not* interreligious dialogue. In philosophical parlance, their physical presence is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for dialogue. Why? Because dialogue, “even at its best, is only talk” (Buren, 1989:423). More importantly, “at the heart of interreligious dialogue stands true, bidirectional communication; only where humans can freely “talk” to each other can true dialogue occur” (Teipen, 1994:354).

2.1 The Necessity for Message Corporeality, Strength and Representativeness

A corollary of the need for a real Stimulus message is for it to be physical in nature and of appropriate signal strength. Not only must dialogue participants

verbally respond, but human language “presupposes corporeality: vocal utterances need to be audible” (Traber, 1990:210). Nor does it:

... help to plead ineffability, to claim that this presumed [religious] unity is beyond the scope of language, for we must remember that we are discussing the issue of interreligious dialogue, which by its very nature is linguistic. To claim that the purported unity can be neither understood nor expressed to another by means of language is to condemn the dialogue to failure from the start (Losel, 1989:192).

Interreligious dialoguing is an earthly mundane act, not a heavenly mystical one. Indeed, the Stimulus message must also be relevant and representative to qualify as authentic dialogue. Indeed, there “is no true dialogue when each side is relating to a phantom of its own projection, however benevolent that projection might be, rather than to a view of the dialogue that the other can truly accept” (Jacob, 1991:90-91). Once the message has been composed within the Source and transmitted, it needs to be heard by someone (i.e., one’s dialogue partner).

3.0 A Receiver (Religion-B; Participant-B)

The Receiver accepts, decodes and interprets the Stimulus message from the Source (i.e., hears and understands the information). As James Baesler (1994:64) puts it: “Receptiveness to different religious ideas is contingent upon attending to and comprehending those ideas.” If there is no Receiver, then, although the act of talking may have occurred when a message was produced and transmitted by the Source, interpersonal communication has *not* occurred, and so logically speaking, no interreligious dialogue could possibly have occurred. Talking *at* someone or thing or nothing (i.e., the proverbial “talking to the wind”) is not communication. A monologue is not a dialogue. For example, a Roman Catholic dialoguer addressing only Roman Catholic delegates might be engaging in a nice lecture, but no *interreligious* dialogue has occurred. This is literally a case of preaching to the converted, even if interpersonal and intrareligious communication was successful.

Although mono interreligious dialogue scenarios may appear unlikely in practice, this is what happened between Marxists and Christians at the Paulus Gesellschaft International’s European Congress held at Salzburg:

... the 1977 European Congress turned out to be a discussion among Christians of different persuasions. It could not be a dialogue since there were not enough Marxists present to dialogue with Christians... Moreover, even the Christians failed to dialogue. With the exception of four or five well-prepared papers, the remaining presentations turned out to be a series of statements, frequently taking the form of sermons on the major sub-themes of the Congress established for each day... (Thobaben and Piediscalzi, 1978:208).

This particular European Congress had the multiple defects of: (a) turning into an intrareligious dialogue (i.e., between Christians of different persuasions) and not an interideological dialogue as originally envisioned (i.e., between Christians and Marxists), (b) it did not have enough delegates to fairly represent

the Marxists (i.e., a multi Source/Receiver failure), and (c) even in its default Christian intrareligious mode, it presumably turned into an unresponsive monologue rather than a relevant dialogue (i.e., a two-way communication failure). Although one might imagine that having a Source, a Message and a Receiver are the minimal essential requirements for communication to successfully occur, the process is far more complicated than expected.

4.0 Sensory Receptors: The Machinery of Perception

This criterion is a refined extension of the above-mentioned need to have a Source and a Receiver before interreligious dialogue can begin to occur. After all, "Human communication presupposes perception by and through our senses. It thus has an essential bodily quality" (Traber, 1990:209). So, once there is a bodily Receiver and a bodily Source providing Stimulus, the message must be physically strong enough to be perceived by the Receiver before being decoded, interpreted and replied to, after all, "there can be no such thing as a one-way dialogue" (Swidler, 1983:3).

One of the obvious practical consequences of this human communication requirement is that dialoguers have no major sensory deficiencies (e.g., deafness). If delegates do have sensory deficiencies, then at the very least they must have support to compensate for this limitation (e.g., hearing aides). One needs only to imagine the potentially disastrous political ramifications if a faith claimed a desire to hear the Other, and then sent physically deaf delegates unaided to hear them! This could be interpreted as a major snub (physical, religious, political and symbolic speaking).

5.0 The Receiver's Interpretations and Responses to the Stimulus: Information Processing Requirements

Once the Stimulus message from the Source has been physically detected by the Receiver via their sensory apparatus (appropriately augmented as needed), it then has to be decoded, interpreted and responded too. During this process, delegates must understand each other and take full responsibility for it. The reason being that:

... communication is shared responsibility between participants. Each person is responsible for competent communication. Participants are not [just isolated] senders or listeners; all participants are co-creators of successful communication. No one participant has more or less responsibility than others in the situation for the successful creation of meaning. The goal of communication is, therefore, to create mutual understanding (Yoder, Hugenberg and Wallace, 1993:15).

And as Chris Thron (2002:11) pointed out: "the more accurate the transmission, the longer the decoding process." However, this human communication requirement is subject to two significant sources of interference,

namely: (a) language misunderstandings, and (b) conceptual misunderstandings; both of which can have devastating consequences if not controlled adequately.

5.1 Language Misunderstandings

This sort of misunderstanding can easily result from the lack of a common language used during the dialogue. For example, the Stimulus message may have been generated by a Christian (i.e., the Source) in English, and it was heard by a Buddhist (i.e., the Receiver), but it was not understood because the Buddhist delegate only understands Tibetan. In which case, it is neither dialogue nor communication, even if linguistic data was sent back and forth between them. Adopting a common language or using a translator service can resolve this practical difficulty, although it can also generate its own pragmatic problems. These potential difficulties can range from the political battles involved in selecting the official language of the dialogue (e.g., English, French, German, Latin?) to the financial costs involved with providing multiple translators, especially by poorer delegates.

5.2 Conceptual Misunderstandings

Misunderstanding at the level of concepts can be very complex and difficult to deal with. For example, it may be virtually impossible for a Buddhist to truly understand a Christian, and *vice versa*, even if the message was spoken in a language understood by both sides (e.g., English) because of *prima facie* incompatible conceptual frameworks. For example, Peggy Morgan (1995:161) once attributed low attendance at a dialogue conference to this sort of mismatched conceptual framework. She claimed: "It may be that Buddhists are tired of an interfaith language which asserts that we are all children of the one God and which is inappropriate for their tradition. This was raised strongly by some Buddhist participants at Chicago 1993."

This sort of incompatibility issue was also raised by Norman Solomon (1991:17) concerning Jewish-Christian relations. He argued that: "It may not, for instance, be possible to talk within the language of Christianity about distinctively Jewish concepts such as those of Torah and *mitzva*, or to talk within the language of Judaism about Christ or incarnation." Indeed, similar conceptual confusions can also exist because of different factions within a religious tradition. For example:

...within the Jewish world, there is widespread confusion about the meaning of the religious terms of the past. The various sub-groups of Jewry - Hasidim, Orthodox Jews, Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, Reconstructionist Jews, Polydox Jews, Humanistic Jews, as well as Jewish secularists - utilize the same words while giving them utterly different interpretations (Cohn-Sherbock, 1994:179).

Unless there is an appreciation of what these different concepts are, or at least how they compare with each other in reference to some common definition of reality, then it can be argued that no true, authentic communication can occur,

dialogue related or otherwise. Indeed, without “commonly intelligible contents, one wonders what coreligionists dialogue is about. And how?” (Yadav, 1988:180).

5.3 Going Beyond the Sharing of “Raw” Beliefs: A Dialogue Enterprise Imperative

Pragmatically speaking, dialoguers will need to go beyond the sharing of their “raw” beliefs to the creation of some standardised mode of presentation that accommodates all the variables within their differing belief systems. This applies equally well *within* religious traditions as *between* them, due to context, bias and favoured interpretations that may impede understanding. Indeed, for a “theology to be meaningful, it must never be so closed into one symbol system that it cannot be understood by anyone else” (Horsfjord, 2001:54). As Peggy Morgan (1995:163) suggested, one would need to analyse “how the language worlds fit together and whether there is consistency or any reflection on the part of the believer about what is taking place and why.”

At the same time, it must also allow intelligible comparisons and common understandings to be achieved in a fair and equitable manner. This requirement was prefigured by Raimundo Panikkar (1987:103) when he claimed that:

A fruitful dialogue has to agree on the parameters to be used in the dialogue itself, otherwise there is only talking at cross-purposes. Simply stated: What do we mean by the very words we use? The talk about meaning of words precedes, conditions, and also constitutes dialogue.

Boys, Lee and Bass (1995:262) also advised that: “in the early stages, we need to provide participants with a vocabulary and conceptual framework adequate for dialogue.” As did Monica Konrad Hellwig (1982:72) who argued that dialogue “assumes the meaning of some common terms and understandings and the need to explain some unique terms.” Unfortunately, no practical solutions were offered by these commentators, yet, there is a practical way around this dilemma.

5.4 What Can Be Done to Promote Dialogue Understanding?

If one does not want, for example, to use a Christian’s exclusive use of a Buddhist’s religious system as the only means to access its core-experience (i.e., enter into what Pieris (1987:163) called a *communicatio in sacris*); or if one does not want to violate one’s own belief stance, as Peggy Morgan (1995:161) had reported regarding: “a bhikkhu [who] was prepared to relate to the predominant [but inappropriate] God-language of his audience in order to communicate Buddhist concerns”; and if one still wants to engage the religious Other with integrity and co-operation, then one practical solution is to adopt Leonard Swidler’s (1990:55-56) ecumenical Esperanto, that is, “a way of understanding ancient religious insights in terms of critical thought... building a “universal theology of religion-ideology.””

This was a good first step, however, a better practical solution that still fits within the ecumenical esperanto tradition and has significant heuristic benefits is to

use a taxonomic/typological approach. This allows one to go beyond what Paul Knitter (1987:185) called shared “shaky ground,” while avoiding the trap of superficial, common denominator reductionism. Such a conceptual schema is an important aide in helping the Receiver’s interpretations and responses to the Stimulus.

5.5 The Taxonomic/Typological Approach to Religious Phenomena

This general strategy has been advocated for some time within the broad religious community. For example, Smart and Hecht (1982) examined different religious systems and dissected their components into six distinctive categories, namely: (a) Sacred Narrative, (b) Doctrine, (c) Ritual, (d) Institutional Expression, (e) Experience, and (f) Ethics. So, whatever the differences in factual content between the differing religions, the broad areas of phenomenal type had been identified, delineated, defined, categorised, compared, and hopefully understood and appreciated by all. This taxonomical approach was further enhanced by Moore and Habel (1982) with their typology of religion for the classroom. They proffered eight distinctive categories of religious phenomena, namely: (a) Beliefs, (b) Religious Experience, (c) Sacred Stories, (d) Texts, (e) Ritual, (f) Social Structure, (g) Religious Ethics, and (h) Sacred Symbols; all of which contained many finely detailed subdivisions within each category and subcategory (see their Appendix 1).

5.5.1 Six Advantages of the Classificatory Approach

There are at least six heuristic advantages to be gained from this classificatory approach, and which significantly impacts upon the dialogic enterprise as a whole. Namely:

- (a) It consciously and unconsciously, explicitly and implicitly, breaks down barriers between faiths by demonstrating the commonality of their various religious components. For example, faiths have many sacred stories that they like to recount to believers and non-believers alike (see Joseph Campbell’s numerous works on world myths). In fact, demonstrating commonality among various religious traditions is one of dialogue’s overt goals as espoused by Paul Mojzes (1978:11) in his 10th dialogue ground rule, namely: “Emphasize things you have in common.”
- (b) Each faith automatically gets a religious lesson in the Other’s belief system every time a particular phenomenon is analysed and compared. For example, the Christian’s use of *The Lord’s Prayer* and the New Ager’s practice of enclosing oneself within a white light bubble, dome, shell, circle or sphere (Buckland, 1993:60-62; Douglas, 1989:5; Mariechild, 1988:4-7) are both rituals of protection. Indeed, gaining meaningful knowledge about the Other’s religious tradition is another desirable goal of interreligious dialogue. This positive outcome was also in accordance with Paul

Mojzes' (1978:11-12) 11th and 22nd dialogue ground rules. Namely: "Strive for a clearer understanding of his or her position. Be willing continually to revise your understanding of the other's views." "Dialogue should present a new appreciation for the value of both positions." Even more insights can be gleaned through iterations of conceptual extrapolation and interpolation.

- (c) Increased analytical power is given to the user that will elevate their analysis of the phenomena under consideration beyond dogmatic religious assertions into more objective scientific realms. Thus short-circuiting potential dialogue barriers by resorting to rationality (with its rules understandable by all), instead of battling blind emotionalism or curt authoritarianism that stifles discussion and debate.
- (d) Rationality's attendant concepts are fairness and predictability, which all delegates can take comfort from. This can encourage further "safer" dialogue, whether in the pursuit of curiosity, interest or truth. Encouraging further dialogue is itself an intrinsically desirable goal, while this more rigorous mode of examining faith phenomena becomes an act of interreligiosity in, and of, itself. One can thus walk their talk and then talk about their walk.
- (e) The taxonomical/typological approach locates specific religious phenomena within the universe of all religious phenomena, and thus places definable parameters upon phenomena that are traditionally relegated to the infinite or the ineffable. Once the infinite becomes finite and effable, it can be concretised, categorised and profitably employed for a variety of pro-dialogue purposes. If increased theological understanding is derived from this analytical process, then so much the better.
- (f) Interreligious dialogue can now be rescued from the tyranny of the simplistic. For example, when someone asked Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet about his faith he replied: "My religion is kindness" (Morgan, 1995:164). Although this was food for contemplative thought, and a potential poster slogan, it was cryptically unhelpful in the dialogic context without further elaboration. However, once this simple statement was located within the above-advocated taxonomy, one can begin to understand its ramifications if designated a "ritual" comment, or a "sacred story," or part of the Buddhist "ethical system." Concept guessing is now replaced with greater degrees of certitude over meaning.

Overall, the taxonomical/typological approach is a far more efficient method of sharing meaningful information, and a more productive means of fostering understanding between different religions.

6.0 Noise: The Problem of Communication Interference

Noise is a dialogic pollutant that interferes with communication pathways and needs to be studiously avoided. This problem can manifest itself into two basic forms, namely: (a) external/channel noise, or (b) internal/semantic noise.

6.1 External/Channel Noise

Blake and Haroldsen (1975:12) coined the term “channel noise” to describe those physical factors which impinge upon the communication process. For example, the “screeching of passing cars, the hum of an air conditioner, the lisp of the speaker, the sunglasses a person wears, may all be regarded as noise, since they interfere with the effective and efficient transmission of messages from sender to receiver” (DeVito, 1985:11). Consequently, formal dialoguing needs to take place in relatively peaceful, quiet spots, and hopefully with administrative noise reduction protocols put in place to ensure it. This sort of noise problem is fairly easy to control in the majority of instances; not so internal/semantic noise.

6.2 Internal/Semantic Noise

Blake and Haroldsen (1975:12) coined the term “semantic noise” to refer to distortions resulting from the internal world of the participants. As they explained: “Within any type of communication activity there often is a discrepancy between the codes used by the encoder and the decoder, even though the message is received exactly as it was sent.”

6.2.1 Seven Sources of Internal/Semantic Noise

Internal/semantic noise can occur if the dialoguer’s comments were not understood due to any one the following seven reasons (or combinations thereof):

- (a) The Receiver was inattentive to the Source and their Stimulus message and so missed it, whether due to sleepiness, daydreaming, fatigue etc.
- (b) The Receiver was highly charged emotionally, and thus not very receptive to rational discourse, especially if offended in some deep, personal way. Indeed, “Closed-mindedness is perhaps the classic example of psychological noise” (DeVito, 1985:11).
- (c) There are distorting attitudes, cultural differences and religious ethnocentrism that results in selective filtering of the Stimulus message. As was once curtly said, no “one can bring a totally open mind to a dialogue except an imbecile who has not yet learned to use a human language” (Newbiggin, 1982:14).
- (d) Using words, subject areas, sentence patterns and sets, or message organisational patterns that are difficult or confusing for the Receiver to grasp. For example, “for persons not educated in this tradition [Christianity], who do not understand *hypostasis*, *physis*,

homoousios, homoiousios, homoousios kata panta, this language can be not just mysterious but meaningless” (Kung, 1988:205).

- (e) The use of different denotative word meanings, that is, the Receiver thinks the Stimulus message points to something other than intended by the Source. For example, the Receiver may think that the word “dialogue” refers to *spiritual dialogue* (e.g., sharing “cave of the heart” meditations between Zen Buddhist and Christian Benedictine monks), whereas the Source was actually referring to *discourse dialogue* (i.e., sharing academic ideas on specific issues). As Keith Williamson (1980:12) argued concerning the concept of “spirituality” within Christianity: “Benedictine spirituality is different than Franciscan spirituality, which is different from Methodist spirituality.” In short, the same word can have radically different meanings per person between and within religions.
- (f) The use of different connotative word-meanings, that is, the shades of meaning the Source and Receiver associate with the words used. Therefore, as “dialogue begins... we shall frequently find that the same word carries an entirely different cluster of meanings in the different traditions; we may also discover with surprise that quite different words are used to mean the same thing” (Taylor, 1980:218). For example, within Christianity, the word “God” may refer to the OT “Yahweh,” whereas other Christians may be referring to the NT “Lord” or “Jesus Christ,” whether as “God” (i.e., the creator of the universe and man on Earth), or as the “Son of God” (i.e., God’s messenger/agent/helper). As James Baesler (1997:11) noted regarding praying: “Christians that relate to God as Holy Spirit might pray differently than those that relate to God as Jesus.” Alternatively, when Christians hear the Muslim’s “Allah” they may not realise that this refers to God as the creator of the universe and man (including Christians), not some foreign, competing deity (that is usually perceived as a false god, a lesser god, but not our God, the real, true God).
- (g) Assigning different weightings to the same words. For example, as Norman Solomon (1991:16) pointed out:

“Messiah” (in Greek, *Christos*), for instance, is a very weighty term for Christians - indeed, it may not be possible to have a Christian language without it. Among Jews the term carries less weight; it is important rather than central (an arm or leg, rather than the heart, of the body of Judaism).

Internal/semantic noise generated within an interreligious dialogue event is more difficult to control than with physically based external/channel noise, but various potential control measures exist. For example, they could include the provision of stimulants such as tea and coffee for mental alertness, for those whom this is not a religious offence (Mormon delegates may need other stimulants such as chocolate); the provision of information sheets to alert delegates to the potential

barriers *a priori* (i.e., adopting a forewarned is forearmed policy); and also, the official fostering of non-condemning attitudes as a dialogue protocol (i.e., evoking civility and the dialogic equivalent of the rule of law). It also makes good dialogue sense when each “partner must listen to the other as openly and sympathetically as he or she can in an attempt to understand the other’s position as precisely and, as it were, from within, as possible” (Swidler, 1982:9). In essence, this tactic is aimed at promoting dialogic empathy.

Because this religious attitudinal requirement has now been recast as a TCM requirement, it gains credibility (and increased participant compliance) by appealing to scientific authority (with its greater intrinsic appeal to impartiality). This can help alleviate many potential fears of religious contamination, or concern over surreptitious conversion intents by those delegates who think it a form of devious trickery to be “forced” to think like the religious Other.

7.0 Feedback: Response Actualisation

Feedback is a critical communication element that links the Source with the Receiver and is frequently seen as *the* defining characteristic of two-way communication. Keith Williamson (1980:12) described the overall process as: “interpersonal communication - i.e., conversations between “you” and “me”” as distinct from: “Intrapersonal communication [which] is basically a conversation that “I” have with “myself.”” Without Feedback, one cannot check if the Source’s Stimulus message has been correctly understood by the Receiver. After all, to “talk about people is not the same as to talk to them; nor is this quite the same as to talk with them” (Smith, 1973:47). Not only does one-way communication violate the important dialogic criteria of mutual respect and reciprocity, but “under the monological model faith becomes blind credulity, for questions cannot be asked, and unless we are able to question, how can we check whether we have got it right or not?” (Potter, 1988:3). It was a valid point.

As Don Jackson (1991:40) argued regarding the communication cycle in the preaching context: “With feedback the preacher receives some evidence of the reception of the sermon and may make adjustments as necessary,” for example, changing one’s speech volume to compensate for a noisy room. Feedback also “allows the preacher to evaluate the impact of the message and various factors which affect that impact (simplicity, Biblical basis, relevance, and source credibility)” (Jackson, 1991:41). Dialogue delegates do the same sorts of things while trying to get their points across.

Officially organised, bi-lateral interreligious dialoguing requires the representative of Religion-A (i.e., the Source) to talk (i.e., produce Stimulus) to the representative of Religion-B (i.e., the Receiver) who is physically present, attentive, has perceived all the message, understood it, and responded competently, appropriately, and reciprocally. This Feedback requirement is the human communication equivalent of Paul Mojzes’ (1978:11) 11th dialogue ground rule. Namely: “Listen to what your partner is saying. Strive for a clearer understanding of his or her position. Be willing to revise your understanding of the other’s viewpoint.” Dialogue is not a monologue cut in two!

If we apply this element of the TCM to dialoguing, then it means understanding the Stimulus message properly via repeated cycles of the Feedback process (with one cycle being the theoretical minimum). Then based upon that correctly received message, we can learn from it (i.e., change our past perceptions based upon more correct facts). When this learning happens we have automatically changed as a result of this newly found knowledge (i.e., personal and intellectual growth). Feedback is thus the pivotal moment of intellectual advancement, in addition to being the defining characteristic of two-way communication-cum-interreligious dialoguing.

8.0 A Situation or Context: The Interpretative Milieu

This last remaining TCM elements refers to “the situation or setting within which communication takes place or the circumstances that surround a particular piece of communication” (Dwyer, 1993:12). And especially considering the non-existence of a social vacuum, and that “hardly any “context” today is isolated, there will always be other “contexts” with which one is in contact” (Horsfjord, 2001:54). So, when “trying to interpret other’s messages, we need to understand that the context affects how we perceive the relationship, and that the relationship influences the meaning we give to the content” (Yoder, Hugenberg and Wallace, 1993:17).

This milieu factor is important for interreligious dialoguing for it can impact upon: (a) the reason for the dialogue, (b) the specific intent of communicating, (c) the place and location of the communicating, (d) the actual occasion of communicating, (e) the nature of the dialogue participants, (f) their relationships with each other, and (g) their relationship across the faith lines. These variables (and interrelationships) can colour all the Stimulus messages before, during and after the dialogue. After all, “communication is different in a discussion among close friends at a favorite watering hole, at a funeral home where a memorial service is being held for a loved one, or at a rowdy New Year’s Eve party in a friend’s home” (DeFleur, Kearney and Plax, 1993:23). Dialoguing is no different.

Indeed, a dialogue about the religious response to abortion, for example, takes on a whole new dimension if it occurs inside an abortion clinic, or a brothel, than it would if it was held in a church or university lecture theatre. As such, and if the potential dialoguers felt strongly enough about it, it can determine if the delegates will participate in the event at all. Not surprisingly, the context can also affect “the emotions people feel about each other, their relative power and status, their attraction for each other, and their involvement with each other’s lives” (Yoder, Hugenberg and Wallace, 1993:16). Given the close proximity of dialogue participants, the discussing of strongly felt religious-cum-emotional issues before “rivals” and peers, and the potential for year long (and greater) dialogue programs, ensuring right relations between each other is essential for continued successful engagement (Kozlovic, 2001b).

A Human Communication Specification for Interreligious Dialoguing: Going Beyond Traditional Religious Formulations

If we consider all of the above criteria derived from the TCM and reformulate it, then interreligious dialogue can be said to contain thirteen basic elements. Namely, it is: (a) an active, dynamic event; (b) a pragmatically orientated event; (c) a two-way process of primarily verbal communication supported by non-verbal behaviour; (d) dedicated to exchanging deeply held views; (e) on common subjects; (f) between two or more fundamentally different participants; (g) who hold many differing views; (h) and who officially represent their faith/religion/ideology; (i) using a common mode of information presentation; (j) for the explicit purpose of learning from each other and/or elucidating various religious viewpoints; (k) with the specific intent of achieving mutual understanding, respect and cooperation; (l) while the process is being conducted in a fair, just and sympathetic manner; and (m) freely accepting whatever results emerge from the activity (but hopefully it is a positive and constructive engagement).

This enhanced human communication scientific formulation significantly expands upon older definitions of interpersonal communication. Such as:

... an interactive process whereby two individuals in the context of a personal relationship (some level of personal knowledge and intimacy is necessary) and particular situation, create, transmit, receive, and coordinate their symbolic verbal and nonverbal messages with the intent to share meaning with one another (Baesler, 1997:9).

More importantly, this newly enhanced TCM definition significantly expands upon the numerous *religiously* based definitions of interreligious dialogue. For example: "By dialogue is meant a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views. The primary goal of dialogue is for each participant to learn from the other. Stated negatively, dialogue is not debate" (Swidler, 1982:9). Alternatively, "First and foremost, dialogue is an encounter of religious persons on the level of their understanding of their deepest commitments and ultimate concerns" (Swearer, 1977:35). Or, "interreligious dialogue requires four criteria: (1) interpersonal communication; (2) different religious commitments; (3) a mutual attitude of respect and open-mindedness, implying a willingness to learn and grow from the other; and (4) significant religious content in, or implied by, the conversation" (Dunbar, 1998:456).

Applying the TCM to Dialoguing: The General Principle

More efficient and effective dialogue conferences can now be designed by addressing *all* the requirements of the TCM which may have been missed when only faith based formulations of interreligious discourse were used. For example, in the past, organisers may have forgotten to vet conference delegates to ensure that they truly represented the religion in question (i.e., a valid Source), or they did not arrange event sites that were quiet (i.e., avoiding physical Noise issues), or they did not provide appropriate beverages to aide mental concentration (i.e., avoiding

internal Noise issues such as inattention). They may have also forgotten to formally select a common dialogue language (i.e., avoiding cultural misunderstandings), or they had inappropriately labelled monologue events as dialogue events when the communication flow was only one-way (i.e., no valid Receiver or Feedback). These sorts of problems can now be a thing of the past. If each significant variable mentioned within the TCM is acknowledged, checklist style, and then applied to the planning of every future interreligious event, then quality must inevitably improve. The superiority of the TCM framework for formal dialoguing will be automatically reflected in the more professional running of the event, and hopefully from the greater communication fruits that will inevitable flow from that act of professionalism.

Conclusion

The more scientific human communication conceptualisation of interreligious dialoguing yielded many profound theoretical and praxis insights that may have been missed by partisan religious formulations of the task. This paper has shown what an ideal dialogue environment would/should/could be like, and it had successfully collated in one convenient spot dialogue comments culled from a wide literature base that supported the overarching TCM approach. No doubt, more technically sophisticated communication models could enhance understanding of these basic processes and provide even deeper insights, but at least the classical simplicity of Taylor *et al.*'s (1977) eight-element model demonstrated its fundamental viability in the simple one-on-one bi-lateral context. Hopefully, more accomplished communication scholars and religion experts will take up the challenge of applying their cutting edge scholarship to the turbulent world of interfaith communications. In the meantime, teaching the TCM to neophyte researchers seems a useful first step. Further exploratory research into this exciting interdisciplinary field is warranted, recommended and certainly long overdue.

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