A Mutual Advantage: Interreligious Dialogue and the Discipline of Religious Studies

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As the world becomes increasingly globalized, interdependent and pluralistic, humanity finds itself boldly moving forward into the "Age of Dialogue." Or so Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes, authors of *The Study of Religion in an Age of Global Dialogue*, believe.[1] While this may seem an optimistic view of the direction in which civilization is moving, globalization is presenting new challenges as people of different cultures find themselves living side by side.[2] Dialogue between traditions is one way to peacefully rise to this challenge.[3] A variety of religions living in close quarters are participating in such dialogues, yet scholars of religion have been slow to realize the learning potential of these interactions.[4] A main contributing factor to this lack of attention is likely the subjectivity involved in interreligious dialogue. The religious studies scholar has been trained to treat religious phenomena as objectively as possible, but it is

[1] Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes, *The Study of Religion in an Age of Global Dialogue* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2000), 89.
[2] Anselm Min, "Dialectical Pluralism and Solidarity of Others: Towards a New Paradigm," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65.3 (1997), 593.
[3] David Krieger, "Communication Theory and Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 30.3 (Summer/Fall 1993), 346.
[4] "What is surprising is that few scholars have bothered to write about the place of interreligious dialogue in the academic study of religion" (Scott Daniel Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35.3 [Summer/Fall 1998], 457). Some exceptions are Robert D. Baird, John Carman, and Klaus K. Klostermaier.

participation in dialogue that best leads the scholar to an understanding of the dynamics involved.[5] According to Scott Dunbar, scholars such as Robert D. Baird[6] would disagree with this position, maintaining the traditional viewpoint that "personal religious beliefs have no place in the academic study of interreligious dialogue."[7] However, the American Academy of Religion revised its mission statement in 1996 to welcome "all disciplined reflection on religion from both within and outside of communities of belief and practice."[8] It is important to note that this inclusion of a more subjective approach remains fairly controversial within the academy.[9] Nevertheless, with that in mind, this revision bodes well for further research into the type of academic learning that can occur during interreligious dialogue.

Furthermore, participants in interreligious dialogue make use of the academic study of religion to provide a basis of information from which to develop dialogue with each other.[10] With this in mind, it becomes clear that interreligious dialogue and religious studies provide opportunities for mutual advancement. As this paper will illustrate, religious studies can provide a critical

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[5] Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," 458, 463.
[6] See Robert D. Baird, "Hindu-Christian Dialogue and the Academic Study of Religion," in H.G. Coward (ed.), *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 217-29, esp. 218, 222.
[7] Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," 463. Evidently, objectivity is still lauded in much thought surrounding religious studies.
[8] Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," footnote 32.
[9] Dale Cannon, comments regarding the presentation of *A Mutual Advantage* at the Regional AAR/SBL/ASOR Conference, University of Seattle, Seattle, Washington, 30 April 2005.
[10] Krieger, "Communication Theory and Interreligious Dialogue," 352.

perspective and academic foundation[11] for a dialogue involving faith positions, and interreligious dialogue presents an opportunity for religious studies scholars to expand their repertoire of methods while learning valuable information about various religious traditions. The first section will describe interreligious dialogue, covering some of the challenges faced within dialogue (such as the existence of various forms of one tradition) and the methods used to conduct dialogue. Clarity in these areas permits the exploration of religious studies as a method for interreligious dialogue. Following that, interreligious dialogue as a useful method within the academic study of religion will be asserted. The possible dangers of the involvement of one with the other (for instance, the publication of inflammatory academic material at an inopportune moment in dialogue) will also be briefly considered in an effort to provide a more complete perception of the dynamic between religious studies and interreligious dialogue. This paper will then conclude with a greater understanding of the mutually beneficial relationship between interreligious dialogue and the academic field of religious studies.

Interreligious dialogue can be defined as "respectful communication between two or more persons committed to different religions, about issues of religious significance, in a common attitude of open-mindedness."[12] In addition, most discussions of interreligious dialogue appear to agree on one thing: the participants in a healthy, productive dialogue must be open to the possibility of

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[11] Revision suggested by James Linville, University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta, December 2004.

[12] Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion." 456.

personal transformation.[13] The degree of transformation varies from Ahmad Jalali's potential change in opinion[14] to David Kreiger's experiential understanding of another tradition.[15] One can see that this very openness to transformation might exclude certain members of a tradition from the dialoguing process. It is highly unusual for conservative Christians, for instance, to take part in interreligious dialogue with Muslims.[16] Furthermore, a resistance to *intra*religious dialogue can present a challenge for participants.[17] The combination of these two factors often results in the absence from dialogue of minority groups within a tradition. Peter Huff suggests that the scholarly vision of acceptance of plurality may serve as an example of the choice to include these significant members in dialogue. Whether or not they are willing to participate in dialogue – at least in the form described here – remains in question.

Some theories of interreligious dialogue aim at maximizing the plurality existing among religions to the point where global interaction and acceptance is achieved. Kreiger, for instance, claims

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[13] See Ahmad Jalali, "Message from Ahmad Jalali, President of UNESCO'S General Conference," *Dialogue and Universalism* 14.1 (2004), 22; Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," 465; Krieger, "Communication Theory and Interreligious Dialogue," 346; Min, "Dialectical Pluralism and Solidarity of Others," 596.
[14] Jalali, "Message from Ahmad Jalali," 22.
[15] Krieger "Communication Theory and Interreligious Dialogue," 353.
[16] Aminah McCloud, "Reflections on Dialogue," *Muslim World* 94.3 (July 2004), 337.
[17] McCloud, "Reflections on Dialogue," 338. She says: "I have found that in most dialogues, Christians are not talking to each other and Muslims are not talking to each other." During preparations for the 100th anniversary of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, she found that "for members of [the Muslim] group of dialoguers, everyone who was not a Sunni immigrant was suspect" (337). As well, see the prejudice against fundamentalist Christians in Peter A. Huff, "The Challenge of Fundamentalism for Interreligious Dialogue," *Cross Currents* 50.1 (Spring/Summer 2000), 94, 101.

> [t]he goal of interreligious dialogue cannot be the proclamation of a new syncretism, a sloppy synthesis, the artificial and lifeless construction of a world religion or an abstract common denominator of all faiths; instead, interreligious dialogue must deepen and purify all religions and, in a certainsense, preserve their uniqueness.[18]

It is this assurance of the maintenance of one's own religious identity that could entice conservative participants to the field while making the more liberal participants comfortable with their presence. Those who see in interreligious dialogue an opportunity to realize a universal theology or underlying unity[19] do not seem to realize that this extreme sense of inclusiveness can actually alienate potential participants. The methods of dialoguing described by pluralists, however, often border the realization of universality. Nevertheless, careful wording and practice allow for the retention of one's own tradition. The acceptance of another's religion occurs within the safe space of the dialogue, and, according to Krieger, need not alter one's own deep foundational convictions.[20]

Kreiger's method for conducting interreligious dialogue begins by clearly demonstrating the role academia plays in dialogue, then moves into the realm of religion. Finally, he suggests a mystical realization of the non-contradictory

[18] Krieger, "Communication Theory and Interreligious Dialogue," 353.
[19] Min ("Dialectical Pluralism," 591) points out that Leonard Swidler, John Hick, and Mark Heim all appear to be working from variations on this assumption.
[20] William Paden's discussion of "worlds" may facilitate this idea, as interreligious dialogue can almost be viewed as a different world in which others may interact. See William Paden, "World," in W. Braun and R.T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion* (New York: Cassell, 2000) 334-47. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (trans. G. Barden and J. Cumming; New York: Crossroad, 1989; German original, 1960), referenced in Hans H. Penner, "Interpretation," *Guide to the Study of Religion,* 63-65.

relationship of one religion to another.[21] This last part may remain inaccessible to the scholar of religion as a scholar of religion – and quite possibly to many of the dialogue participants. His seven-step process is outlined as follows: [22]

1. A "critical and faithful understanding of one's own tradition is required. This implies objective knowledge gained by all the methods of scientific inquiry, as well as a firm rootedness in the spirituality and practice of one's own religion." This starting point for dialogue can begin in the classroom, as students have their misconceptions dispelled and their knowledge of their own and other traditions expanded with academic instruction.[23]
2. One "must gain an understanding of another religious tradition." Religious studies is a discipline which is aimed at achieving these first two steps. While it may not address at a personal level the spirituality involved, it can still be involved in making observations about the practices and manifestations of a particular tradition's idea of the Ultimate. For example, methods of study used to attain a better understanding of what makes a religion unique include classification,

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[21] Krieger, "Communication Theory and Interreligious Dialogue," 352-53.

[22] The following 7 steps can be found in Krieger, "Communication Theory and Interreligious Dialogue," 352-53. I have clarified and added supporting information to some of them, hopefully without altering their original meaning.

[23] McCloud, "Reflections on Dialogue," 335, 339-41. Her article further develops the classroom as a forum for interreligious dialogue.

As well, some (secular) universities have developed programs intended for the study of interreligious dialogue, such as the Department of Interreligious Relations at Madurai Kamaraj University in Tamilnadu, India (Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," 462).

comparison, and interpretation, as well as studies of religious experience, gender, manifestation, myth, ritual, sacred, social formation, ethnicity, and culture.[24]

3. This "understanding must be allowed to become conviction," for the deepest foundational convictions of religion are non-negotiable. Basically, one must accept another's tradition as true. It is important to remember, however, that religious truths are often relative – they develop within the context of the lives of the people living within the religious tradition. Therefore, in my view, the acceptance of these convictions as truth includes the truth that it is not one's own tradition, hence not contradictory to one's own personal truths. This step is probably the most challenging step for participants in a dialogue to take. While it may be tough for a scholar to see how relative (to culture and context) specific religious beliefs are, it can be nearly impossible for religious participants to accept as "truth" something that clearly contradicts their own beliefs.[25] However, allowing it to become "conviction" may be feasible if all parties are dedicated to the dialogue. This requires the understanding that statements regarding a person's religious truths are such a part of the individual participants

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[24] These are all topics covered by Braun and McCutcheon's (eds.) methodological textbook *Guide to the Study of Religion*. I would recommend this text as an introduction to the variety of methods used within the discipline of religious studies.

[25] Terry Muck makes a similar statement in Terry Muck, "Interreligious Dialogue and Evangelism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 17 (1997), paragraph 11. Accessed at http://apologia.gospelcom.net/mainpages/WhatsNews/Muck/MuckArt.html#anchor551862

(and their accompanying tradition) that they become incontrovertible fact in the context of those involved in the dialogue. Using a mundane example, rejecting these statements could be akin to rejecting another person's place of birth. Even if one has never heard of another's hometown, and has no reference point for it, it remains part of that person's development. It becomes conviction, even if it is not relevant to one's own place of birth. Likewise, in understanding another participant, it is necessary that the proclaimed (to use Krieger's terminology) personal religious truths are accepted for what they are – realities of their existence. When faced with the dilemma of one non-negotiable truth "squared off" against another, it is important to remember that as humans learn, their realities are expanded and changed. Keeping this in mind allows an understanding of how people with non-negotiable truths – who are committed to dialogue – may go into it with their truths and come out of it with them intact, yet newly held in relationship with other ones.

4. The "acceptance of the other truth must not imply the exclusion of one's former beliefs." An "internal *intra*religious dialogue between the two convictions that one has now internalized" must take place. Krieger sees this as taking place on a mystical, symbolic level. The study and understanding of symbols is seen here as a door to the

mystery of a foreign tradition.[26] Within religious studies, symbols may be studied as a manifestation of a tradition's Ultimate.[27] The point of departure between religious studies and interreligious dialogue here exists when the participants personally treat these symbols as truth insights toward the other's Ultimate.[28]

5. This "discourse must then become an external *inter*religious dialogue with representatives of the other tradition. We return to the level of… [making truth] statements." The participants in the dialogue have to be able to recognize themselves in the other's interpretation of their tradition. It is at this level that transformation may occur, as boundaries are loosened and opened to discussion. Truth statements may not change, but ideas stemming from them and interpretations of them may. While Krieger is ultimately identifying this as a religious experience, it also holds value for scholars – as their research and

[26] An interesting story in support of this process arises from Larry Dwight Shinn's article, "Words, Symbols, Experience, and the Naming of the Divine," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29.3 (Summer/fall 1992), 425-30. The following is an experience of his, unverifiable by scholastic discourse, yet supportive of these interreligious dialogical discursive steps. Shinn, a devout Christian with extensive scholarly knowledge of Shaivite symbolism, teachings and ritual, had what he refers to as an experience of the "'divine effulgence'" of Shiva, a Hindu god, (429). He claims that it was his extensive knowledge of Hindu words, symbolism, and ritual that led his being able to experience this phenomenon. He also considers this experience to be a true exposure to Hindu divinity, yet it did not shake his belief that he belonged to the Christian faith. He did not allow and had no desire to allow his experience to exclude his former beliefs.

[27] For an interesting discussion of "Manifestation," please see Thomas Ryba, "Manifestation," *Guide to the Study of Religion*, 168-89.

[28] "[F]or van der Leeuw, the phenomenological experience of the religionist is not identical to the phenomenal experience of the religious individual" (Ryba, "Manifestation," 180).

ideas of a tradition are checked against the religious reality of the tradition's adherents.

6. These "steps must be presupposed for all parties involved in the interreligious encounter. When someone remains at the level of [making truth statements] or argumentation, no dialogue is possible".[29]
7. For the dialogue to have been successful, one must now be able to practice, to "experience both religions" in everyday life, in an arena of non-contradiction with each other. One has to be able to live out and make use of the knowledge and understanding gained within the dialogue. Krieger does not say one has to do so; merely that true understanding enables this.

Krieger's process[30] leads to the interreligious dialogical goal of a universal pluralism whereby traditions recognize their solidarity while remaining unique.[31] The implicit religious elements in the above methodology identify

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[29] An interesting departure from this statement is made by Muck, who uses Krieger's model, but suggests altering it. Within Krieger's model may be found three levels: argumentation, proclamation, and disclosure (Muck, "Interreligious Dialogue and Evangelism," paragraphs 15, 16, 19). In a nutshell, they correlate to the following areas of the process listed above: learning basics about each other, proclaiming truths, and internalizing others' truths. Muck recognizes and rejects the hierarchical order of development that Krieger has placed them in (with the mystical at the end). Instead, he views the three as three of the ways that humans connect in dialogue with each other, with none better than the other. Looking at it this way allows people of all worldviews to enter into dialogue in a way that is most accessible and practical for themselves and their faith. Muck, "Interreligious Dialogue and Evangelism," paragraphs 22-41.

[30] There are other processes outlined for successful interreligious dialogue, but this was the intermediate. Anselm Min outlines three ways a dialogue achieves success (593-596), while Swidler and Mojzes discuss in depth a process which expands upon this one in chapter 11 ("From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Global Dialogue," 145-78).

[31] This is also Min's goal in "Dialectical Pluralism," 603.

interreligious dialogue as a religious phenomenon. As well, Swidler and Mojzes describe the results of dialogue as

> …a profound shift in how we perceive ourselves, our lives, out priorities, our relationships, our world. The dialogical awakening removes obstructions that tend to cloud our global vision as it releases passionate moral energy, intensifies social responsibility, and deepens spirituality.[32]

As such, this model deserves to be studied by the scholar of religion. The participants in both disciplines can then learn from each other, as the world of academia contributes to the informational foundation of the dialogue, and as the dialogue provides the scholar valuable information and field research opportunities[33] regarding the beliefs and practices of religious traditions.[34] After all, this dialogue is a process in which "participants bare their souls"[35] in a concerted effort to foster understanding in this increasingly globalized world.

Interreligious dialogue as a method for the academic study of religion involves taking a good look at the traditional scholarly value of objectivity. While a descriptive study may be advantageous both when facilitating and documenting a dialogue, it may not transform the information revealed within the dialogue into a deep understanding of for what a tradition truly stands.[36] If simple "[w]ords and dialogue cannot, by themselves, lead to reconciliation" between

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[32] Swidler and Mojzes, *The Study of Religion in an Age of Global Dialogue*, 149.
[33] Linville, December 2004.
[34] Liyakatali Takim, "From Conversion to Conversation: Interfaith Dialogue in Post-911 America," *Muslim World* 94.3 (July 2004), 346. "Those who engage in dialogue not only relate their tradition but also what is meaningful in it, how they experience and relate to the sacred within their tradition."
[35] McCloud, "Reflections on Dialogue," 338.
[36] Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," 457-58, 463.

traditions,[37] how could the observation of words and dialogue lead the religious studies scholar to a deeper understanding of the beliefs and practices of the participants? Not only that, but Dunbar makes a good point about the "so-called" objectivity employed by the descriptive method: using Wilfred Cantwell Smith's position on objectivity set forth in *Towards a World Theology*, Dunbar points out that "the 'objective' study of humans is an illusion because scholars can never step outside their humanity to be truly 'objective.'"[38] Smith sees the ideal of objectivity as actually dangerous due to the fragmentation and misunderstanding it can cause.[39] While this may be taking it a little far, it remains an example of the realization that objectivity in religious studies is harder to achieve than was originally thought.[40]

In response, scholars are participating in certain religious phenomena, such as ritual, in order to enrich their understanding.[41] Dunbar goes on to state

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[37] Takim, "From Conversion to Conversation," 353.
[38] Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," 459.
[39] Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," 459.
[40] Seen throughout Braun and McCutcheon (eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion*. Articulated in Sam D. Gill, "Play," *Guide to the Study of Religion,* 459: "As [the academic discipline of religious studies] attempts to understand others in their own terms, it cannot help but recognize that our results are powerfully determined by our expectations."
[41] Ronald L. Grimes, "Ritual," *Guide to the Study of Religion*, 263. Grimes describes the transformational aspect of many rituals, which leads to the inquiry as to whether interreligious dialogue could be viewed as an interesting form of "interreligious ritual" ("Ritual," 266-67), an intriguing concept, that, unfortunately, I do not have room to develop here. I will make mention of one event, however, that occurred at the fifth annual trialogue of the International Scholar's Annual Trialogue: "an extraordinarily sensitive and moving liturgy for peace in the morning – with music, readings from the three traditions, and symbolic gestures (reuniting the altar that had been broken into four pieces)" (Leonard Swidler, "International Scholars' Annual Trialogue [ISAT]," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 33.3 [Summer 1996], 365). Such a ceremony appears to have had religious significance for all involved, while maintaining the separate identity of each in the different scripture readings – an excellent example of an interreligious ritual in the context of dialogue.

that "[i]nterreligious dialogue is not a passive 'object'… but an existential activity that should be appreciated for its interactive human dimension."[42] As an interactive human religious phenomenon, perhaps the way to achieve understanding of it is to interact with the participants. Dunbar, however, cautions against getting too involved, suggesting that a scholar participating as a scholar should remain "on the bridge of dialogue instead of in the waters of debate."[43] To this student of religion, this implies making full use of the academic tools at hand, and approaching the dialogue from whatever faith position one may hold (even an atheistic one), but not allowing oneself to make judgements on the beliefs of others or one's own personal beliefs. This way, a measure of scholarly objectivity can be maintained, while at the same time increasing understanding of both the dialogical process and the stated and interactively revealed beliefs and practices of the involved parties.

One way to do this, Dunbar suggests, is through prescriptive study. By "prescriptive," he does not mean making suggestions as to where a certain religion might want to clean up its act. He is referring to prescriptively studying interreligious dialogue as a whole – its role in society, the role of the scholarship within it. Dunbar goes so far as to adopt a suggestion by Friedrich Heller[44] that

[42] Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," 460. This statement is influenced by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion, Library of Philosophy and Religion* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).
[43] Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," 466.
[44] See Friedrich Heller in Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (LaSalle, IL.: Open Court, 1986), 272.

one of the "hopes" of the academic discipline of religious studies is to facilitate global "tolerance and co-operation".[45] While this may be a hope of some of the members of the academic discipline of religious studies, and feel like a responsibility to those individuals, this is a vast overgeneralization if applied to all scholars of religion. The varieties of motivations driving scholars are fundamental to the richness of the field. Within this diversity, the prescriptive study of religion (and interreligious dialogue) plays its role in that it makes use of descriptive observations to draw conclusions (or form hypotheses). These conclusions may be utilized in the facilitation of global "tolerance and co-operation," but are by no means the sole role religious studies can play here. Many participants within the dialogue are perfectly capable of analyzing data, and, while the scholar's knowledge of the context of the data they have collected is helpful in drawing conclusions, sometimes the conclusions drawn may be "determined powerfully by our own expectations."[46] Nevertheless, these prescriptive studies often serve to elucidate important points, even if not everybody agrees upon their conclusions.

The final method proposed by Dunbar in the study of interreligious dialogue is that of experiential study. He explicitly states that the "best way for a scholar to learn about interreligious dialogue, if he or she is religious, is to spend

[45] Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," 461. According to Dunbar, Rudolph Otto, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Joachim Wach all share this point of view.
[46] See footnote 39.

time directly in dialogue and write about it from personal experience."[47] He does not feel that this is the best way to engage in all of religious studies; however, likening it to cultural anthropology, he suggests that a participatory approach is the best method for the understanding of dialogue. Krieger's method for dialogue insists that the "other" (those within the other religious tradition) be able to recognize themselves in accurate interpretations. This is also an objective of the responsible academic study of religion.[48] While there are clearly different ultimate objectives in mind from the point of view of the dialogue participant and that of the scholar of religion, participating in interreligious dialogue allows immediate feedback as to how well a scholar has interpreted a tradition. This in itself is a valuable technique to practice. A clear interpretation of another tradition is what scholars attempt, and it is also key to a successful dialogue.

The clearest interpretation and feedback will be facilitated by trust among the members of the group. Take, for example, the International Scholars' Annual Trialogue (ISAT). This is a group of scholars who form the body of participants in a dialogue between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. They do not come together specifically to study the phenomenon of interreligious dialogue, but to take part in an "interreligious think tank." The important point to note about this group of scholars is that the twenty-seven individual members remain constant through each meeting, with the explicit intent of gaining trust – thereby allowing the

[47] Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion," 463.
[48] Gill, "Play," 459-60.

dialogue to deepen.[49] Actually participating in a dialogue, exposing one's self and views to others, leads to an increase in a trust relationship. The more trust that exists between individuals, the more of oneself one feels comfortable revealing. Participating in an interreligious dialogue, rather than merely observing it, has great learning potential. An interpretation of sacred text, for instance, that may be glossed over with a bare minimum of interpretation when speaking to or in front of a stranger, may be delved into with great depth when dialoguing with a trusted individual. This can therefore lead to a greater understanding of somebody's personal beliefs, and also of the tradition out of which these beliefs arose.

Of course, knowing somebody well also indicates knowledge of those things he or she disapproves of or scorns, which could lead to slanted answers or even the non-discussion of certain topics. If these topics do not run deep, a healthy dialogue should be able to address them and work through them. If, however, they do (such as the Israel/Palestinian conflict), some dialogues may work to find other points of contact,[50] or to establish a firm, respectful relationship long before these topics are broached. Trust also played a role when the scholars of ISAT, who are also all religious individuals, took it upon themselves to examine the potentially nonnegotiable and often problematic issues

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[49] Swidler, "International Scholars' Annual Trialogue (ISAT)," 360-61.

[50] Min states: "whether, to what extent, to whom, and about what we should be open depends on concrete historical conditions, such as the distribution of political and economic power, communal interests, and cultural horizons" ("Dialectical Pluralism," 598).

in dialogue between Jews, Muslims, and Christians: "The Chosen People/Promised Land, The Christ, The Qur'an." The dialogue concluded with the realization that "each of the three 'nonnegotiable absolutes' has been subject to an immense amount of interpretation and negotiation within each tradition. Hence, they do not block dialogue, though they make it difficult at times."[51]

The dangers, then, of this growing relationship between the academic study of religion and interreligious dialogue, exist only insofar as the participants of the dialogue may not be committed to healthy dialogue. If a true commitment exists, then the release of a scholarly work documenting a history of conflict will either not be discussed (choosing, instead, to discuss a less-flammable issue) or will be discussed in the context of a group of people committed to each other in an atmosphere of trust. In fact, a factual work that reveals the root of years of discord might actually benefit the dialogue, because then (to use a medical analogy), the disease, not just the symptoms, may be treated.[52]

Another potential concern is that one's subjectivity may get in the way of the (theoretically objective) traditional academic study of the dialogue. However, a commitment to respect, tolerance, and open-mindedness should not allow this to interfere with the actual religious phenomenon of dialogue. In fact, Raimon Panikkar, a leading figure in interreligious dialogue, suggests that withholding one's beliefs when participating in dialogue actually harms the dialogue, holding

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[51] Swidler, "International Scholar's Annual Trialogue (ISAT)," 364.
[52] Chris Roth, in Hillary Rodrigues, Tom Robinson, James Linville, and John Harding, Religious Studies 4001, 1 December, 2004. University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta.

it back.[53] It would follow, then, that the only responsibility the academic discipline of religious studies may have to interreligious dialogue is that, if a scholar chooses to participate, he or she participates whole-heartedly.[54] Aside from that, as distinctive disciplines in and of themselves, neither is accountable to the other, because it is the responsible use of each that feeds the processes on both sides.

By providing the foundational factual basis for a faith-based dialogue, academia makes its contribution to the process. Observation of and participation in the dialogue provides information on the religious phenomenon of interreligious dialogue, as well as providing insight about the beliefs and practices of the traditions involved. Observation is more useful in studying the dialogue simply as a phenomenon, whereas participation leads to trust. Trust can then spur the dialogue into deeper discussion, transforming perceptions while providing valuable information and intimate knowledge of various aspects of the religion as a whole – such as symbols, rituals, scripture, and beliefs. Menachem Mendel once said that "If I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then you are not you and I am not I. But if I am I because I am I, and you are you

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[53] Raymond Pannikar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 46, 50. Panikkar, a self-professed "Hindu-Christian-Buddhist-Secularist," (Carolyn M. Craft, "Raimon Panikkar and the Coming Present Trinitarian Consciousness," *Cross Currents* 47.2 [Summer 1997], 244) appears to approach interreligious dialogue more from a faith perspective, but he is found in almost every writing on interreligious dialogue that I came across while researching this paper. It seems to me that his claim may actually be viewed as an invitation for scholars to participate in interreligious dialogue, provided they leave their objectivity at the door and abide by the rules.

[54] If one were to take this step to subjectivity, I suspect a personal decision to go further than the preliminary steps of dialogue likely would have been made anyway.

because you are you, then you are you and I am I – and we can talk.” [55] Throughout the dialogue, there is no need to abandon one’s role as a scholar – but the manifestation of this role may undergo somewhat of a transformation, as the traditional ideal of objective observation gives way to subjective participation.

As the world gets figuratively smaller, the need for dialogue to foster co-operation and cope with pluralism increases. As a religious phenomenon, interreligious dialogue can provide valuable insights to the academic field of religious studies. Not only do the interactions between participants reveal truths about their beliefs, practices, and how they relate to other religions, this format allows for an extension of the scholar into a more subjective realm of study. This paper has defined and described interreligious dialogue, outlining Krieger’s seven-step method of universal pluralism used in its practice. This method can make use of religious studies as valuable background knowledge, and religious studies, following the suggestions of scholars like Dunbar and the examples of groups such as ISAT, can then make use of the rest of the dialogue to expand scholarly knowledge of the field and of the participating traditions. The perceived dangers of an irresponsible cross-fertilization between the two are only that – perceived. The relationship between interreligious dialogue and the academic study of religion is one of mutual advantage.

[55] Menachem Mendel of Kotzk in Merek Nowak, “Pedagogy and Therapy Through Universalizing Differences,” *Dialogue and Universalism* 13.9 (2003), 113.

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