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Some Requisites for Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract

A prolonged (yet telescoped) rendition of the chequered history of relations between Christianity and Islam, as each religious community operated out of different political contexts, illustrates diverse modes of interaction, from disputation to mutual illumination via a shared Hellenic philosophical tradition. A theological probe takes us to the heart of Christian teaching—the triune God—only to unveil remarkable affinities with Islamic developments regarding divine unity. The key to our entire exploration—intellectual humility—functions specially well here: recognizing the comparable logics of revelation, as well as acknowledging the power of these revelations to transform human beings into holy men and women, should motivate us to attempt to reconcile apparent contradictions between Abrahamic faiths in a manner similar to the way philosophical theologians of these traditions proceeded in the Middle Ages to reconcile their respective revelations with reason. A tactic axial to this analysis compares Qur'an with Jesus, rather than Qur'an and Bible, to show the fruitfulness of this more coherent approach. Support from both traditions for a pervasive attitude of intellectual humility shows how to open ways forward.

Keywords

Christian, Muslim, Dialogue, Qur'an, Humility

My life has been particularly blessed, from an ecumenical family to a range of interfaith encounters, to living and working among Jews and Muslims, notably in Jerusalem. It was the milieu of the Holy Land which effectively worked a transformation in my scholarship as well, employing the languages of this environment to trace the exchange among philosophical theologians – notably, Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali, Maimonides and Aquinas – from the twelfth- and thirteenth-centuries. Many have noted that the presence of a pervasive philosophical tradition – Aristotle in a neo-Platonic key – helped to facilitate an intellectual exchange among Muslims, Jews, and Christians (in that order)

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in that epoch, yet we face even more formidable obstacles than the absence of such an overarching framework in trying to emulate that interaction today. No doubt, and we shall trace some of these difficulties. Yet we also enjoy far more sophisticated access to sources, and a vast range of secondary reflections in each tradition. What we may lack, however, for a host of cultural reasons, is the requisite intellectual humility to engage one another fruitfully. Indeed, that is hardly an anticipated concomitant result of graduate study in the west today! Nevertheless, a recent comprehensive study of "the im-possibility of inter-religious dialogue" by Catherine Corrnille lists humility, and especially "doctrinal humility", as the prime requisite for fruitful dialogue. Writing from a Christian perspective, she notes the rich Christian tradition of spiritual humility, proceeds to offer three telling reasons for doctrinal humility: historical consciousness, eschatology, and apophatic theology; and briefly traces the way other religions praise humility, insisting, in the face of a creator God, that their adherents develop it.[1] We shall focus on intellectual humility as it has been displayed (or not) in Jewish, Christian, Muslim exchange over the centuries, to uncover pointers towards what might facilitate, as well as block, current exchanges, then delineate some crippling socio-cultural obstacles to exercising dialogue in today's situation, to close with suggested ways to step beyond our current impasses. A formidable task, indeed, calling for humility on the part of believers from each Abrahamic faith as they find themselves having to acknowledge responsibility for exacerbating the problem more than contributing to the solution.

Historical Interactions

John of Damascus stands as a key figure in the earliest exchanges between a settled orthodox Christianity and the Muslims arriving from the Arabian peninsula animated by a vigorous revelation. His father served in the new Islamic government, which sought the services of many Syriac Christian translators to render Greek philosophical writings into Arabic. Moreover, the Byzantine hegemony was hardly uniform, as many eastern Christians doubtless preferred unknown and untested rulers to the often oppressive ecclesiastical-political regime of Byzantium. Given that the only available hegemonies were religious, it was largely a question of which one granted more tolerance to local custom and beliefs. Moreover, Muslims would have little stake in engaging differences among Christians in doctrine, though they were mightily impressed with Byzantine imperial structures,

[1] Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Continuum/Herder and Herder 2008).

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seeking quickly to mimic their splendour in Damascus, first in Umayyad and then in Abbasid polities, and through them to the farthest reaches of the Mediterranean world. In his critical comment on this cultural assimilation, Seyyed Muhammad Khatami, onetime president of Iran, offers a Shi'ite perspective which helps to explain what had long been a conundrum for me: the apparent propensity in Islam for a strong ruler when the religion itself is anything but hierarchical.[2] It is Khatami's simple contention that I have just noted: coming as they did from the Arabian peninsula, the Muslims who invaded the stately Byzantine empire were utterly impressed with imperial splendour, and quickly sought to adopt it. Thenceforth, and indeed as much for Shi'ites as for Sunnis, the history of Islam has been punctuated by imperial regimes: Abbasid, Ottoman and Moghul among the Sunnis, and Savafid among the Shi'a – to name but a few. Much as Christians not only acquiesced to Constantine's granting their religion an imperial status but came to enjoy the attendant privileges, learning to read their revelation through the lens of power, so would Islam adapt the Qur'an and the *sunna* tradition to sub-serving imperial ambitions.

Yet an imperial polity could also make room for differences; indeed, relegating intra-religious disputes to the courts of each religious community allowed imperial regimes to concentrate on larger issues, as well as fostered a political climate of tolerance, thereby aligning the prevailing Islamic hegemony with those Qur'anic verses which fostered co-existence. This climate came to favour a form of inter-religious exchange known as *disputation*. Often taking the form of Muslim commentary discourse on revelation, these public disputations proposed to lay out the religious tenets of each group for the other to hear, with an eye to showing the superiority of one over the other.[3] Similar exchanges were undertaken in Christian lands with Jews, notably in the Iberian peninsula and in Provence, where the atmosphere of the Islamicate had made itself felt. In these exchanges, Talmudic forms of reason were in evidence. Indeed, George Makdisi has argued that such disputations formed the matrix for the early scholastic form of instruction via "disputed questions".[4] We cannot forget, however, that Christians in the Islamicate, and Jews in Christendom, had to comport themselves as a minority group, for no matter how much tolerance the political structures may (or may not) have permitted, societal norms prevailed. Moreover, the very structure of

[2] Seyyed Muhammad Khatami, *La Religion et la Pensée Prises ou Piège d'Autocratie* (Cahiers de MIDEO 4 Louvain/Paris: Peeters 2005).

[3] Gabriel Said Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in a Sectarian Milieu: Abd al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins* (Leiden: Brill 2004).

[4] George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges :Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1981).

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such disputations, as we have suggested, set up a win/lose scenario, so more thoughtful exchange would have to await another modality. Such a shift would also require socio-political structures more which were favourable for reflection.

These emerged in the west in the form of religious communities, first as monasteries and then also by friaries (notably Franciscan and Dominican), which enjoyed a degree of freedom from both secular and ecclesiastical authority, though in fact secular authority in the west was decidedly less structured than in the Islamicate, however fractured it was there. The result was a flourishing of intellectual life from the twelfth-century on, especially as translations of Greek philosophy began to emanate from the Islamicate in the thirteenth-century. For if Islamic thinkers like al-Farabi ("the second Aristotle") and Ibn Sina [Avicenna] had to depend on the goodwill of patrons whose position was subject to political vicissitudes, monks and friars enjoyed a sustaining community which could provide not only a secure milieu for intellectual inquiry, but teams of secretaries to assist their intellectually endowed confreres. Moreover, the philosophically-minded of each Abrahamic community encountered the potentially totalizing intellectual milieu of neo-Platonism and so turned for assistance, when they could, to those from other faiths, seeking ways to defend their revelational sources, announcing the free creation of the universe by an intentional creator, in the face of a philosophical scheme which articulated the source of the universe in terms of an intellect emanation that need not be free. Evidently, those who came later were able to interact with their predecessors, which is precisely what we find in Moses Maimonides' use of Ibn Sina, as well as his presumed inspiration by al-Ghazali, while Aquinas' employ of Maimonides (and his assimilation of Ibn Sina) is clear from citations in his work.[5] So despite and indirectly because of the ongoing crusades, the Mediterranean milieu fostered such an exchange among intellectual inquirers of different Abrahamic faiths, intent as they were on finding philosophical ways to elucidate their shared belief in a free creator. Even though the "exchange" was often one-way, given circumstances and generational differences, the results were quite spectacular, testifying to the fruitfulness of an overarching philosophy as well as the shared conviction that truth sought could be found where it was recognized. Where differences in faith may have seemed irreconcilable, employing a philosophical tradition to bolster those revelational verities which were shared proved a powerful incentive to learn from one another.

[5] David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1986).

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Some Implications for Today

Several centuries separate us from this medieval arena of exchange, carried out amidst hostilities among the Abrahamic faiths, as history has since conspired to enlarge the arena to encompass the globe, and to redistribute power relations so as to transmute differences into clashes, often fuelled by resentment at the profound shift in power. Now it is the disanalogies among the three Abrahamic faiths which are instructive: even those Christians who believed that the "new testament" had effectively replaced the "old" had to tolerate the presence of Jews in their societies, for they could never utterly deny their own spiritual ancestry. Yet Jews seldom posed a threat, as social arrangements reinforced the conviction that Judaism is for Jews. But a revelation expressly destined for the entire human race, whose very claims proved oxymoronic for Christians, had to be on a potential collision course with Jesus' command to "preach the gospel to all nations", even though Islam, coming along last, had expressly provided privileged niches for Jews and for Christians as possessors of a divine revelation. So as the "Muslim world" gained territory and power, it was destined to be a geographic as well as a spiritual "other", for Christendom could hardly find room for so potent an adversary in its midst – not even the grudging space granted to Jews. Yet a burgeoning medieval and early modern Europe could hardly resist the charms and allurements of the renowned Islamic civilization, especially as their elites sought elegant accessories from Indian and China which passed through the heart of the Islamicate on their way to Europe across the fabled "silk road". Indeed, the desire to find a tax-free route to those very accessories would spell the end of such fated interaction between Christendom and the Islam world, as Columbus' voyage opened up far more than the Indies: two continents to exploit. So after arresting the Ottoman imperial forces at the gates of Vienna in 1565, western Europe could confidently turn its back on Islam to pursue the mercantile missionizing of North and South America, the result of which was an extraordinary development on all levels, culminating in Napoleon's landing in Alexandria in 1799, to initiate western colonization of both Ottoman and Moghul empires: the once-glorious Islamic world.

In breathlessly short compass, such is our Christian history with Islam, once marked by fruitful philosophical and theological exchanges in medieval times, as well as an enduring fascination for, if not seduction by, the "marvels of the East". Yet the technological gulf stimulated by European exploitation of America, and marked by Napoleon's conquest, soon consolidated by British imperial forces, led inescapably (via the introduction of the secular, socialist, utopian movement of European – though not Islamic – Jewry called "Zionism") to a simmering resentment in the Islamic world and the

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resurgence of a form of political Islam which might hope to recover some of their collective pride. All of this remains powerfully present in that part of west Asia which looks like the "Middle East" from London, especially as Britain's presence of power has been replaced by that of the United Sates in this traditionally Islamic domain. Yet we cannot forget that "the Islamicate" traditionally provided room for Jews as well as for Christians, who were always to be found among "Arabs", who themselves constitute only twenty percent of the Islamic world. Just as there are religious differences among Arabs, so ethnic differences abound among Muslims. Reminding ourselves of this rich panoply of taste and cultures should help to offset media stereotypes. Nothing can effect that better than the mixing of peoples, so one of the most powerful incentives for learning about Islam among contemporary western Europeans and Americans is the fact that one's daughter's roommate in college turns out to be a Muslim! In a fashion quite opposite to Napoleon's landing in Alexandria, we can also say of these encounters that "the rest is history" – which should open us to the theological potential of our times.

A Theological Excursus

So much for the larger context. Since we gather as a theological association, allow me what we called an 'excursus' in Rome. My teacher of theology there, Bernard Lonergan, had a way of diagnosing the crippling propensity to defensiveness in religion. Although teaching in Rome on the cusp of the Second Vatican Council, in a curriculum which had varied little from the days following Trent in the sixteenth century, by his mode of teaching Lonergan helped to transform that atmosphere in ways which were soon to animate the council itself. He proposed to divide the world between those who "search for understanding" and those who "need certitude", sharpening two distinct propensities present in each of us into a dichotomy for purposes of emphasis. The disparity in verbs is telling: 'search' is an intentional term; 'need', a psychological one. Indeed, nineteenth- and twentieth-century psychology had reduced *religion* or *faith* to the status of need-fulfilment, thereby eclipsing its intellectual dimension, while Lonergan undertook to illustrate, by his mode of teaching, how the history of theology could be read as one of "seeking understanding", after Augustine's account of *theology* as "faith seeking understanding". A contemporary example of this mode of teaching, amplified by literary examples, can be found in Robert Barron's *And Now I See*, where he sets out to show us how the doctrines of the church, often couched in dry scholastic and even legal language, can become "soul food" when properly expounded and lived. They each show how the proper grasp of a religious tradition will always include the

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realization that what the tradition passes on to us lies well beyond our grasp, so revealed truths can never become our possession but must remain something we are ever trying to understand better and to put into practice. (Soren Kierkegaard famously observed that "one can never claim to *be* a Christian—except in the banal sense of registry; we can at best be said to be *becoming* one".) Indeed, this is what it means for us to speak of "revealed truth", for if we locate the very *truth* of a revelation in its divine origin, our grasp of that truth must (by definition) ever be deficient. In practice that means that we will always be ready to allow others to lead us into a richer understanding of what we profess. Indeed, the experience keeps recurring: encounter with believers of other faiths leads us into a deeper appreciation and understanding of our own. Yet when two persons of diverse faiths each purport to have fully grasped – to possess, in other words – the truths of their tradition, the result will be just the opposite, with each professing their own position by defending it in the face of the other in a way which often denigrates the other's faith. Why do they need to do that? Partly, of course, because each needs to be right – indeed, that is crucial to a saving faith. Nor are they able to comprehend how both faith traditions can be correct, especially when they seem to contradict each other. So at the heart of acrimonious disputes lies a thorny philosophical issue, for it is a simple fact of logic that of two contradictory statements, if one claims to be right, the other must be wrong, and most of us are quite keen logically, even if we have had little or no formal training in it.

Yet we can get some help from a strategy employed by a Christian philosophical theologian, himself writing in the age of the crusades when disputation was preferred to dialogue, Thomas Aquinas. Following the lead of a Jewish thinker, Moses Maimonides, he was more concerned with contradictions between faith and reason than with conflicting formulations from differing religious traditions, for Jews, Christians, and Muslims in his time seemed to presume their traditions were starkly incompatible on key issues. Yet as we shall see, the logic remains the same, even if a host of attitudes today regarding "other religions" differ significantly from Aquinas' day. His strategy is simple: if a point of "sacred doctrine" appears to contradict a point that has been rationally demonstrated, then either we have miscast the doctrinal teaching or we have failed to demonstrate it properly. In other words, the proper deliverances of faith and reason cannot possibly be at odds, since the free creator of the universe is the ultimate author of both. So we must have got something wrong in the formulation. Indeed, it hardly behoves us to presume that we always "get it right", so common sense, together with the divine source of revelation, cannot but elicit a strong dose of intellectual humility. All of the Abrahamic thinkers in medieval times were prone to use this critical strategy to defuse conflicts between faith and reason, as they sought

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to illustrate their shared conviction that all truth derives from a free creator. But how can we extend it, as they were not inclined to do, to conflicts between formulations of different faiths in one God, when those formulations appear to be outright contradictory? That will be our challenge, living at a time when adherents of each of these faiths have come to espouse dialogue over disputation – a position which the Second Vatican Council enshrined in a key document (entitled in Latin, *Nostra Aetate*) which has profoundly influenced all Christians worldwide.

However, extending this critical strategy to conflicts between doctrinal formulations of different faiths will require more than the bare assertion that there can be but one God that these different faith-traditions worship. It also demands that each tradition respect the revelation of the other as deriving from that same God (much as the medievals insisted that faith and reason each derive from the creator), yet few Christians are prepared to acknowledge that with regard to Muslims, who, for their part, have avoided having to reconcile Christian doctrines which apparently contradict the Qur'an by continuing to insist that the formulations in question reflect sources of revelation with which we have tampered and so falsified, since the Qur'an acknowledges the divine source of the Gospels. Here looms the chronological asymmetry between Muslim and Christian revelational sources: coming so much later, as it does, the Qur'an can, and is nearly constrained, to recognize the divine origins of both Torah and Gospel, while Christians are as reluctant to identify the Qur'an as divine revelation as Jews are to see Jesus as God's revealing word, though for quite different reasons. Christians have been taught that Jesus' revelation is definitive, as it brings the original revelation of God to Moses to an unparalleled focus, while Jews faithful to the Torah must await a prophet "even greater than Moses" (Deuteronomy 18:18), and the preponderant Jewish tradition will argue (against their own people who found this prophecy fulfilled in Jesus) that Jesus cannot be that prophet. So both Jews and Christians find a later revelation purporting to come from the same God to be affronting. Moreover, attempts to determine whether each of these Abrahamic faiths directs its adherents to worship the same God raise vexing philosophical issues as well, though only the culturally ignorant will contend that "Christians worship God and Muslims worship Allah", for Arabic-speaking Christians have always directed their prayer to Allah!

Yet despite the *prima facie* affront which Christians spontaneously feel at anyone's claiming that the one God offered a new revelation to Muhammad in the Arabian peninsula in the seventh Christian century, we can find a middle ground sufficient to encourage us to mediate apparent conflicts between these revelations in their shared insistence that the freely creating God can only be One. We enter that middle

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ground when we learn to refer to Muslim revelation by "the Qur'an says", since, when Christians find it difficult, if not impossible, simply to say of it that "God says", they can nonetheless refrain from saying "Muhammad says", out of respect for Muslims' faith in the Qur'an as divine revelation. Yet that deliberate linguistic act represents more than simple respect for another's faith, for it may also acknowledge that what Muslims take to be an "inimitable book" has inspired countless men and women over the centuries to authentic holiness. And authentic holiness, like a genuine classic text, seems to be recognizable across palpable differences in belief, as our contemporaries find in Mother Teresa. Moreover, Jews, Christians, and Muslims must all claim that their respective revelations stem from an historical event that represents a presence of the divine in history in such a way that makes the event of revelation a uniquely historical event. (Indeed, I would argue that the giving of the Torah to Moses, the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus, and the "coming down" of the Qur'an to Muhammad are the only possible candidates for historical events that are incomparable.) So whether or not one can believe their claims, these disparate beliefs display a similar logic in what they demand of believers. Salman Rushdie offered oblique testimony to this logical fact in the opening gambit of his *Satanic Verses* by employing a literary conceit whose notoriety was lost on those oblivious to the way Islam has always associated the metaphor of "coming down" with the Qur'an's coming down to the Prophet. So the capacity of Rushdie's two protagonists to sustain a free fall from an airliner exploding at 33,000 feet to make a perfect landing in the English Channel, could only be heard by Muslims as mocking the divine origins of the Qur'an; as if to say: if you can believe this, then you can also believe the Qur'an came down from Allah to Muhammad to make him "the Prophet", but my opening scenario is clearly fantastic!

Recognizing the comparable logics of revelation, then, together with acknowledging the power of these revelations to transform human beings into holy men and women, should motivate us to attempt to reconcile apparent contradictions between Abrahamic faiths in a manner similar to the way philosophical theologians of these traditions had proceeded to reconcile their respective revelations with reason. One of the more obvious examples is the Qur'an's mocking the Christian doctrine of "the Trinity". Note first that we are not dealing with generic "Muslim teaching" but with the very source of revelation itself. Yet that fact also opens us to avenues of interpretation, since each Abrahamic faith-tradition recognizes that its revelational source, cast as it is in human language, demands interpretation, and so each has spawned a rich tradition of commentary. (Given this general truth, Christians who contend that Muslim insistence that the Qur'an is the "very word of God" entails that it must

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be "taken literally", that is, that it resists interpretation, is as illogical as the claim that the "the Bible interprets itself". A "fundamentalism" of this sort is as false to each of the Abrahamic faiths as it is common to all!) So careful attention to derogatory statements about "God having a son" in the Qur'an, together with a similar attention to the evolution of the "doctrine of the Trinity" in the first four Christian centuries, can go a long way towards mediating what looks like a stark contradiction: Christians claim that Jesus is the "Son of God", while Muslims insist that it would be preposterous for the one God to have a son! Indeed, once we put it that way it is easy to see how Christian prayer "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (traditionally capitalized since these are not descriptors but names), parallels the way Muslims pray "in the name of God the merciful and compassionate", effectively sanitizing the notion of *Son* so as to remove all but *prima facie* objections to using the term in relation to God the Father. Indeed, for one versed in the history of Christian thought, effecting that transformation took the work of four centuries of intense intellectual effort, utilizing Greek philosophy as well as eliciting bloody conflicts among those who championed differing formulations of the central teaching about Jesus' divinity. For what was at issue, and remains so, is the central teaching of the Torah about the unicity of God: as in the *Shema* – "Hear, O Israel, God our God is one!" So believers in Jesus would have to find a way to confess Jesus' divinity without associating a creature with the one creator. In short, these Herculean efforts to formulate the Christian "doctrine of the Trinity" were undertaken precisely to avoid what Islam regards as the primary betrayal of its God-given faith (much as Jews regard idolatry): namely *shirk*, or "associating" a creature with the creator. So attempting to reconcile this *prima facie* contradiction can also remind Christians of the stupendous fact, often overlooked when speaking blithely of "the doctrine of the Trinity", that it took Christians four centuries to come to an acceptable formulation of the central revelation of their faith: the very person of Jesus. Moreover, the sticking-point was succinctly formulated by Arius, who invoked that same *Shema* to insist that the Word of God had to be created, or at least (oxymoronically) occupy some midpoint between the creator and creatures. So the protracted battle between Arian Christianity and orthodox Trinitarian varieties already reflected this contention later articulated in the Qur'an! Indeed, examples given in the Qur'an of "the Trinity" – as in "God, Jesus, and Mary" – reflect these early confusions: inevitable if Christians prayed to God as Father as well as to the Son, and yet insisted that their God, the God of Israel, is One!

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Returning to the Grammar of Dialogue

As we have developed it, this exercise might seem to demand a working knowledge of Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures, as well as an ability to track sophisticated developments within Christianity. Yet these critical distinctions can also emerge in lived exchanges between other-believers, when their grasp of the formulations of their faith is tempered by a lively realization that these formulae embody a lived practice, from which their meaning derives, which should temper any claim to know precisely what we mean in asserting them. In short, intellectual and spiritual humility becomes a necessary condition for genuine exchange among believers, but that again should be common knowledge gleaned from experience. In fact, the opposite attitude of "knowing it all" appears so antithetical to authentic knowing-by-faith as to disqualify those interlocutors in the face of authentic believers. For all of the Abrahamic traditions treasure the *caveat* that whatever "knowing-by-faith" may mean, it will always exceed the grasp of the knower. In fact, each faith will contend that the reception and practice of faith is more like being grasped by the God who reveals than it can be like our grasping that very One. Moreover, an ability to recognize the historical imbeddedness of one's faith tradition in commentaries or councils will mark a committed believer, whether their instruction in these matters be extensive or minimal. These exchanges – in contrast to contentious disputation – will also have recognized how our traditions have long been intertwined, each in search of understanding the God who creates the universe, and will also have revealed something of God's own self through their scriptures. Building on these commonalities, the practice of dialogue itself, in whatever form, will induce an empathy for the tradition the interlocutor embodies, leading to a mutual hospitality which cannot but evolve, where circumstances allow, to sustaining friendship.[6] Is this not in fact our experience?

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[6] I am indebted, for this articulation of the conditions needed for genuine dialogue, to a forthcoming study by Catherine Cornille (noted here with her permission), entitled *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, to be published by Continuum/Herder and Herder in 2008.

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