

# In the Synagogue, in the Streets, on the Aeropagus: Kerygma and Dialogue with Reference to Acts 17

*A Paper Presented at the  
International eConference on Interreligious Dialogue*

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**Abstract:** *This paper seeks to examine the relationship between kerygma and dialogue, arguing that the proclamation of the Christian message can take the form of a dialogical practice, and indeed of an interreligious dialogical practice. There seems to be an underlying assumption that “dialoguing” necessarily requires the weakening of one’s religious convictions, insofar as to express these in their full-blown form would lead necessarily to conflict and/or the shutting down of the conversation. However, I shall argue that this conclusion is not demanded by the nature of dialogue per se but rather from a particular understanding of what dialoguing means. The latter is underpinned by the assumption that in the realm of religion and spirituality we have no objective access to truth. I shall then hark back to a different understanding of dialogue rooted in Socrates’ philosophizing by making reference to the episode of the Apostle Paul’s kerygmatic preaching of the Gospel in Athens. I will read such a scene as one where kerygma and interreligious dialogue intertwine. The Socratic model of dialogical practice makes room for truth and allows interreligious dialogue to take place without the need to set aside one’s own religious beliefs.*

**Keywords:** Christian Theology, Interreligious Dialogue, Dialectic, Relativism, Acts of the Apostles

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This paper seeks to examine the relationship between kerygma and dialogue, arguing that the proclamation of the Christian message can take the form of a dialogical practice—and indeed of an interreligious dialogical practice. By doing so, I hope to address the worries expressed by many, that interreligious dialogue often seems to prioritize commitments to peace over commitments to truth.<sup>1</sup> In trying to deal with this issue, I am inspired by the persuasion that “sturdy religious commitments to transcendent goals

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<sup>1</sup> Casper, “The Redemption of Interfaith Dialogue.”

need not breed intolerance but can and do underwrite tolerance and even respect for people of other faiths or of no faith at all.”<sup>2</sup> I also hold that people who hold such beliefs are able in principle to recognize the importance of meeting and coming to know their own neighbors in flesh and blood, instead of just interacting with others through the filters of caricatures and stereotypes. One way through which this act of recognition is the practice of interreligious dialogue.<sup>3</sup> Hence, people with strong religious persuasions should not be afraid of engaging in interreligious dialogue; at the same time, they should not be kept back by undue requests of watering down their beliefs as a pre-requisite for joining in the conversation.

In this respect, my thesis is that a false dichotomy is often drawn between proclaiming certain aspects of a religious message and the “mission” of interreligious dialogue<sup>4</sup> This seems to be due to an underlying assumption that “dialoguing” somehow necessarily requires the weakening of certain aspects of one’s own religious convictions, insofar as to express these in their full-blown form would lead necessarily to conflict and/or the shutting down of the conversation. More broadly, this assumption seems to stem from the widely spread cultural persuasion that a belief that one religion is true above all others must necessarily flow into intolerance and violence.<sup>5</sup>

Writing from a Christian Protestant point of view, my main worry is that such a view would require a Christian who wishes to take part in interreligious dialogue to water down his or her own beliefs concerning the unquestionable centrality of Jesus of Nazareth within the history of salvation.<sup>6</sup> Similar preoccupations has been expressed in various forms and places and not

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<sup>2</sup> I owe these words—which I here appropriate to underpin my goals—to Miroslav Volf. See Volf, *Flourishing: why we need religion in a globalized world*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, xv. It should be noticed that, unless otherwise specified, I do not agree with the broader goals of Panikkar’s intellectual and spiritual project, and in particular with his ideas concerning what Christianity as a religion is and should be, ideas that I shall not discuss here and which I find to be in many ways problematic if not plainly wrong in the light of the teachings and life of Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup> Although not exactly concerning the same topic, see Mohagheghi, “Interreligious Dialogue in Conflicts Situations,” 91.

<sup>5</sup> Geisler and Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, 20ff.

<sup>6</sup> For a classic discussion of the issue from a Protestant position, see John Stott’s section on “Dialogue” in *Christian Mission in the Modern World*—here I am making use of the Italian translation, entitled *Missione Cristiana nel Mondo Moderno*. I would like to recognize this text by Stott as a major source of inspiration for my argument.

level of dialectic, that is, of the dialectic between being/non-being, possible/impossible, truth/falsity. However, interreligious dialogue itself is made possible because it is an expression of emptiness, that is, of the very horizon of possibility of dialectic and reality itself, which embraces and makes possible the exchange between different points of view.<sup>37</sup> Hence, nobody comes “empty” to the table, but rather with his or her own ground motive, but the table is in this sense an “empty space” where people can gather and meet. Everyone is entitled to join this exchange, unless he or she decides to refrain from doing so.<sup>38</sup> Once again, this is a “move” made possible by the emptiness that embraces and makes room for our actions.

At the same time, the rejection of relativism implies that our possibility of frankly exposing our beliefs could be met with scrutiny, attempts of dialectical refutation, and the equally frank expression of views opposing our own.

### 3) The Risk of Conversion

Thirdly, such a model of interreligious dialogue necessarily carries with itself what I would like to call the “risk of conversion.” One might think that the goal of interreligious dialogue is not that of making converts. Nonetheless, as we have seen in Acts 17, the kerygmatic proclamation, even when it is led in a Socratic and dialogical style, does aim, and can result in the conversion of our interlocutors, to the effect that they leave behind their former ground motives and adopt our own. Of course, the opposite result is equally and logically possible, so that we leave our own ground motives and adopt those of our interlocutors. In this respect, my argument has been that it is not necessarily the case that there is a contradiction between the proselytizing aims of kerygmatic proclamation and those of interreligious dialogue, that is, of fostering understanding between enliveners of different ground motives. Once again, the possibility of frankly discussing and presenting one’s own views must necessarily come with the risk of having one’s existential orientation changed by what the interlocutors are presenting. While this might result in a

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<sup>37</sup> Panikkar, *Il Ritmo dell’Essere*, 123.

<sup>38</sup> As a marginal remark, we should notice that even this behavior should not be stigmatized but met with kindness; one could think of St. Francis refusing to discuss matters with the Sultan’s priests because he could not prove Christianity to them either by reason, since it is above reason, nor by Scripture because they did not accept Scripture. The moral: even great saints may refuse to join interreligious dialogue; we should be humble and accept this. See Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, 30.

strengthening and/or clarification of one's own starting position, the same process could result in somebody "changing sides" by deciding to live according to a different ground motive.

In this respect, borrowing from Miroslav Volf we could say that religions, if they are to be honest with themselves, are bound to debate which "'Word' articulates transcendence appropriately, about the kind of 'bread' we need, and about the relation between 'bread' and 'Word.'"<sup>39</sup> It could just happen that somebody, or indeed entire groups of people, changes his or her mind on what are the best answers to these questions. Accordingly, the challenge of interreligious dialogue becomes that of helping "people of diverse religions live in peace while engaged in vigorous debates about the nature of the good life and the global common good."<sup>40</sup>

In the light of Volf and borrowing from Hans Urs Von Balthasar, I would like to close this section by offering a final remark: Christians should dialogue with people holding different beliefs in an attitude of prayer and of surrender to the cross. Of course, this surrender may just include the spite, refusal, and controversy such as those raised by Paul's preaching of the Gospel in Athens.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Volf, *Flourishing*, 38.

<sup>40</sup> Volf, *Flourishing*, 82.

<sup>41</sup> See Von Balthasar, *Cordula*, 112–3.

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EXCOMMUNICATING

*the* **FAITHFUL**

JEWISH CHRISTIANITY IN THE  
EARLY CHURCH



**KENNETH W. HOWARD**

**SYNOPSIS**

Excommunicating the Faithful traces the development of Jewish Christianity from among the earliest Jesus followers through its apparent disappearance in the fourth or fifth century. The author's thesis is that among Jewish Christians in the early Church, there existed at least one Jewish Christian sect whose theology stood within the acceptable boundaries of orthodoxy at that time and existed through at least the fifth century, at which point it was declared heretical by the Church Fathers and eventually died out despite the fact that it considered itself part of the greater Church. The author's thesis also suggests that the increasing antipathy of the Church toward Jewish Christianity was the result of a variety of interrelated influences operating over several centuries. Some of these influences included the changing demographics of the Church and the accompanying clash of cultures; the increasing isolation of Jewish Christianity from the predominantly Gentile Church; power struggles between competing Christian communities in Palestine, as well as Rome's interest in asserting its primacy; and theological and pastoral concerns, which were well-intentioned but resulted in increasingly narrow views of orthodoxy and orthopraxis; and lasting anti-Jewish sentiments throughout the Empire, some of which still exist today.



**WHAT HAPPENED  
TO JEWISH CHRISTIANITY IN  
THE FIRST CENTURIES OF THE  
CHRISTIAN CHURCH?**

"HERE IS A THOROUGH STUDY THAT ELUCIDATES A GRIEVOUS TURN IN CHURCH HISTORY WHILE ANALYZING THE ROOTS OF CHRISTIAN ANTISEMITISM. IT'S MESSAGE REMINDS US THAT, GIVEN THE RIGHT SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES, THE OPPRESSOR AND THE OPPRESSED CAN EASILY SWITCH PLACES, EVEN AMONG THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS OF NAZARETH."

—PETER M. ANTOCI, PHD

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