**INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND THE DEBATE
BETWEEN UNIVERSALISTIC AND PARTICULARISTIC THEOLOGIANS:
SEARCHING FOR A WAY OUT OF THE DEADLOCK**

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INTRODUCTION

In the book *'Death or Dialogue-From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue'* Leonard Swidler makes a strong appeal for interreligious dialogue.

“In the past it was possible, indeed, unavoidable, for most human beings to live out their lives in isolation from the vast majority of their fellows, without even having a faint awareness of, let alone interest, in their very existence. Until the edge of the present era, humans lived in the Age of Monologue. That age is now passing. We must move from the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue. If humankind is to make this move, the religions and ideologies must enter into the movement full force. We have in fact begun to make serious progress along this path though the journey stretches far ahead.” (Swidler, 1990, vii-viii)

Such urgent calls to interreligious dialogue are illustrative of the almost unquestionable faith that the movement towards the interreligious enjoyed during the last decennia of the twentieth century. Analysing some of the most recent trends and developments in the field of interreligious dialogue, Georg Evers notes however, that the widespread enthusiasm of the eighties and the nineties for interreligious dialogue is declining. It seems as if “interreligious dialogue is gasping for breath.” (Evers, 2002, 232) One of the possible explanations for this recent trend could be the contrast between the great interreligious ideals of brotherhood, harmony, and peace on the one hand and the actual interreligious climate which is becoming rougher and rougher on the other hand. As an outcome of this perceived discrepancy many people are becoming rather pessimistic concerning the actual impact of interreligious dialogue. “In the aftermath of September 11, people who had always been critical and sceptical about interreligious dialogue felt vindicated in their negative assessment of the whole enterprise of engaging in any kind of dialogue with members of other religions and cultures.” (Evers, 2002, 244) Those already engaged in interreligious encounter, however, retain their trust that dialogue is the way towards mutual comprehension- this being one of the most important steps in ending the conflicts between the religions.

However, interreligious dialogue also encounters resistance within certain theological milieus, which argue for a renewed emphasis on religious particularity and question the meaningfulness and feasibility of interreligious dialogue. In this article I wish to focus on the current discussion between universalistic theologians who emphasize the commonalities between the religions and those theologians whose focus on the particularity of each religious tradition leads them to question the continued need for interreligious dialogue. Central within this discussion is the question of language. Universalist theologians believe that a common religious language underlies diverse traditions and makes interreligious comprehension possible. As such there exists an affinity between interreligious dialogue on the one hand and universalistic tendencies within theology on the other hand. At the risk of making statements that are too general, it can be said that within the so-called interreligious movement there exists a propensity to emphasize commonalities between the religions.¹ The particularistic theologians on the contrary stress the constitutive character of language with regard to the formation of the identity of religious communities and their believers. They argue that every religious language is particular and it is not possible to transcend these particularities and differences in order to find an essential common religious framework surpassing the differences between the religions. Strangely enough, though, the particularistic theologians seem to share the assumption that a common language is necessary for interreligious dialogue. The fact that such a language underlying the different religions is not attainable leads them to repudiate the possibility of interreligious comprehension. Thus particularism draws the curtain on interreligious dialogue and takes us back to isolated forms of theology.

If we choose to endorse the particularistic critics of a common framework transcending the differences between the religious traditions, but abide in sharing the belief in the importance of interreligious dialogue, the challenge is how to find a way out of the deadlock created by the discussion between these two parties and thus create new possibilities for interreligious encounter. In the following, I will first analyse some of the universalistic presuppositions of the interreligious dialogue by tracing back its ideological roots. This will give us some insight in the rationale behind the aforementioned mentioned focus on commonalities. Next, I will expose the problematic character of the almost generally accepted assumption of some common religious framework beneath the different religious traditions thereby focusing on the arguments of particularistic theology. At this juncture we will turn to the question of how to take the concerns of particularistic theologians seriously without ending the interreligious

¹ This does not mean that all engaged in interreligious dialogue focus on commonalities, nor does it mean that within the interreligious movement there is no critic to be heard on this tendency.

dialogue altogether. I suggest a possible way out of this deadlock by questioning the generally accepted supposition that the existence of a common language is necessary for dialogue on instead opting to point toward the human capacity of imagination.

1. Analysis of the presuppositions of the interreligious movement
 - a) The World Parliament of Religions

One way to analyse some of the tendencies and often assumed propositions of the interreligious movement is by tracing its ideological roots through developing a historical outlook on the beginnings of this movement. Interreligious dialogue is a recent phenomenon, which is usually identified as starting in 1893. In that year, Chicago celebrated the 400th birthday of Columbus' discovery of America by organising a World fair, which covered diverse domains, such as science, literature, art, and education. The whole event exuded the sphere of the modern ideal of progress. (Barrows, 1893, 4) Within the organising committee the question was posed whether religion should not also be a part of this festive happening and this in the form of a 'World Parliament of Religions'. Not everybody was equally enthusiastic about this proposal - some feared that the bringing together of so many religions would lead to conflicts. "Many felt that religion was an element of perpetual discord, which should not be trusted amid the magnificent harmonies of a fraternal assembly of the nations." (Barrows, 1893, 5) However the conviction that the modern penchant for unity could also be realised in the religious domain was stronger than the sporadically voiced opinions expressing distrust. It was this belief in the pervasiveness of unity that made the first interreligious gathering possible.

The 'World Parliament of Religions' intended to be an interreligious encounter in the sphere of brotherhood, harmony and cooperation. It brought together an immense diversity of religions including: Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Taoism, Confucianism, Jainism, Judaism, Catholicism, Christianity and Islam. The first 'World Parliament of Religions' finally gave believers of the various religious traditions the chance to offer witness about their own faith and tradition. No longer were they the mere object of study or a possible target for missionary activity, but the 'World Parliament of Religions' gave these adherents of the various religions a voice and made it possible for them to become a subject within an encounter. Thus,, the 'World Parliament of Religions' laid the foundation for the belief in the possibility of a non-apologetic and non-polemic relation between believers of diverse religious traditions, and as such it indeed stakes out the beginning of the interreligious

movement as a movement that wants to promote the positive and constructive relations between the religious traditions. Up until today, the ‘World Parliament of Religions’ still functions as a symbol for the beginning of the interreligious movement. Emblematic of this perspective were the many events organised in 1993 the year of the hundredth birthday of World Parliament of Religions, prime among which being the organisation of a ‘second World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.’²

b) The modern flight from particularity and the trust in universal structures

Many of the interreligious organisations that refer to the year 1893 for their symbolic roots show a certain reluctance towards doctrines, truth-claims and particularities on the one hand and an urge to find commonalities and universal structures underlying the diverse religious traditions on the other hand. Gavin d’Costa compares these assumptions to the modern position towards religion, which is characterised by its flight from particularity and its unquestionable trust in universality and universal structures. (d’Costa, 2000, 2) According to Stanley Hauerwas, we may trace this fear for religious differences and particularities back to the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth century- a period marked by a crisis of authority due to the conflict between the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformation.

“Not only would the Reformation reveal that the ecclesiastical tradition had become deeply fractured, the inability by Christians of different persuasions to agree on any authoritative text, conciliar ruling, or papal decree caused a special challenge to the possibility of co-operation. This lack of agreement would moreover be exacerbated when these differences turned into polemical and eventually violent confrontations within the furor of the religious wars.”³

The shocking confrontation with the inability of different Christian convictions to find agreement, cooperation and a peaceful society, made the trust in particular religious beliefs falter. The trust in claims to religious particularities was lost and such claims became linked with the danger of conflicts. From then on the hope to prevent outbursts of conflicts would be

² In 1993, the Parliament of the World's Religions was convened in Chicago, with 8,000 people from all over the world coming together to celebrate diversity and harmony and to explore religious and spiritual responses to the critical issues that confront us all. <http://www.cpwr.org/who/history.htm>

³ We quote E. Katangole who has tried to synthesize and analyse Hauerwas’ thinking as well as to formulate an answer to Hauerwas’s critics, nonetheless with Hauerwas’s approval. E. KATANGOLE, *Beyond Universal Reason: The Relation Between Religion and Ethics in the Work of Stanley Hauerwas*, Notre Dame, 2000, 8.

based on finding universal structures that undercut these differences. Thus, modernity is marked by a search for transcendental structures within the different domains of reality.

- c) The belief in a common ethical and religious language underlying the different traditions

It was within the context of modernity that the interreligious movement originated in the year 1893, and the modern position towards religion still leaves its mark on many of the contemporary interreligious organisations, which often seem to share the typically modern fear for particularity. Many interreligious organisations see their contribution to religious harmony and unity in the bridging of religious differences by emphasizing religious commonalities. As a consequence they often follow the so-called negotiation model:

“Negotiation is an activity that involves two or more parties, the aim of which is agreement. It presupposes that the divergent interests of the parties may not have to preclude some form of common action. The differences between the parties are assumed to be, or at least hoped to be, nonessential to the action contemplated. In order that agreement may be reached, it is assumed that one or both sides will have to make some concessions.” (Lochhead, 1988, 59)

The focus lies here on the commonalities between the diverse religious traditions. The implicit criterion for a successful dialogue is that it must lead to accord.

Amongst the interfaith organizations themselves, differences of emphasis can be recognized. “There are those which have concentrated on building up understanding and friendship and those who feel that such understanding will grow as people of different religions co-operate in tackling urgent problems of the world.”⁴ (Braybrooke, 1992, 313) The latter are convinced that commonalities between the religious traditions are to be found within the sphere of ethics. “Regardless of the cultural differences [there is the conviction] that one can reach universal judgements about where any religious practice stands in relation to social justice. Whereas doctrinal criteria prove too controversial and prone to ideology to serve as a ground of judgement, the needs of the oppressed are presumably not liable to these deficiencies.” (Heim, 1995, 94). An important sign of the hope of a better world and the contribution religions can make in this perspective was the ambitious and large-scale interreligious encounter, organised in 1993, in the light of the hundredth birthday of the first World Parliament of Religions. “On

⁴ As an example of the first type of interreligious organisations I can refer to ‘World Congress of Faiths’ and ‘The Temple of Understanding’. Illustrative for the second is the work of the World Conference on Religions and Peace’, but also the ‘Council for a Parliament of World Religions.’

4 September 1993 this Parliament passed a 'Declaration toward a Global Ethic', in which people of very different religious backgrounds for the first time agreed on a minimum of irrevocable directives which they were already affirming in their own traditions." (Küng, 1996, 2) This declaration does not carry with it the intention to enforce non-germane directives upon religious communities and their believers. On the contrary, it claims to tie in with the already existing moral consensus between diverse religions: "It simply aims to make known what religions in West and East, North and South already hold in common, but is so often obscured by numerous 'dogmatic' disputes and intolerable self-opinionatedness." (Küng, 1996, 2) This declaration proposes a minimum ethic, which is absolutely necessary for the survival of humankind. "The differences between the religions are not denied, but these should not hinder us from proclaiming *those things which we already hold in common and which we jointly affirm.*" (Küng, 1996, 15) This global ethic assumes that a common set of core values is to be found in the teachings of the religions, and that these form the basis of a global ethic. It affirms that "this truth is already known, but yet to be lived in heart and action." (Küng, 1996, 10)

Those interreligious organisations, which have seen the building up of a fellowship of faiths as their primary task have grappled with the question of the relationship between religions. (Braybrooke, 1992, 313) They tend to assume a pluralistic outlook on religious diversity, which emphasizes the ineffability of the ultimate Reality. In this sensitivity for transcendence and mystery as being outside and above language, we can hear 'echoes of the so-called negative theology', which exhibits a certain reticence toward engaging in any kind of affirmative speech. (Bulhof & Ten Kate, 1996, iii) Following the famous dictum of St. Anselm that God is "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived", the emphasis of pluralist theology lies on the apophatic character of the divine. In this view, none of our human categories or interpretations can be made apply to the Ultimate. The nature of the divine is elevated beyond personal and impersonal descriptions, and is thus trans-categorical. (Hick, 1989, 9-11) That is why pluralist author John Hick does not speak of God or the divine, but of the Real or the Ultimate. The Real is ineffable and transcends all religious descriptions - human descriptions cannot be applied literally nor can they claim absoluteness. Hick states that the different religious traditions are historically and culturally determined interpretations of the one Ultimate Reality. The great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of and correspondingly different responses to the Real. However, no human response pertains directly to the Real, which transcends all human conceptions. These different responses constitute the various ways in which the same ultimate Reality has

impinged upon human life. (Hick, 1989, 313) All believers find themselves in a faithful relation with this Ultimate Reality. It is only the way they express this faithful relation in doctrines and religious practices that explains the differences between them. Here we find once more an emphasis on a common framework beneath the different religions. *Faith* is believed to be essentially the same for all religious traditions, whereas *belief and tradition* stand for the historically and culturally determined interpretation of the ultimate reality. This pluralistic outlook on religious diversity leads to the affirmation that there is a relation complementarity between diverse traditions. Each tradition offers a different, but limited perspective on the ultimate reality. Hick intends people to see the different religions as rich and legitimate responses to the Real. “People should stay in whatever religion they gave received or embraced, but they might also acknowledge the validity of paths sincerely followed by others, and those other paths can contain insights or practices that could complement their own.” (Cheetham, 2003, 137)

When operating out of this perspective, it is more than understandable that, focusing on particularities or making claims to absolute truth is unacceptable. Indeed, the pluralistic interpretation of religious diversity leads to a certain reluctance concerning doctrines and dogmas, which resembles the modern aversion for particularity:

“That Muslims, for example, think of the divine, and experience the divine, as the Qur’anic Allah is not incompatible with the fact that Christians think of the divine, and experience the divine, as the heavenly Father of Jesus’ teaching, or more theologically as the Holy Trinity. In other words, what are called the conflicting truth-claims of the religions do not in fact conflict, because they are claims about different human awareness of the divine, made possible by the fact that, to quote Aquinas again, things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower.” (Hick, 2001)

This reluctance towards dogmas and doctrines is characteristic for the interreligious movement, which understands the finding of a common foundation between the religious traditions as its first priority. A consensus seems to be emerging among theologians engaged in interreligious dialogue, which claims the pluralistic paradigm as the best frame for the dialogue among religions. According to pluralists, only their interpretation of religious diversity can form a context, accommodating all necessary conditions for an open and sincere interreligious dialogue. It is their conviction that “the pluralistic model which understands religious diversity as a permanent given, forms the background of the project of the interreligious dialogue.” (Basset, 1997, 39)

2. A particularistic critic

a) Questioning the existence of a common religious or ethical framework

The above analysis makes clear that the interreligious movement often assumes that it is possible to derive a common religious perspective from diverse religious traditions. In this perspective religious unity is said to be fundamental and the differences are attributed to the interpretive level and are in that way secondary. Thus, it is possible that Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus basically have the same faith; it is only that they express it differently. The object of religious experience and devotion on the one hand, and the essential ethical values on the other are claimed not to be different.

It is precisely these suppositions that are strongly objected to by the particularistic theologians. They accuse the universalistic theologians of not taking difference and particularity seriously enough. According to them this theology winds up subsuming differences under one common denominator. This is a consequence of the fact that they pay no attention to the way religion actually functions in the life of religious people nor do they acknowledge the constitutive character of belonging to a particular religious life form.

A central theme within particularistic theology is the idea that belonging to a certain language, tradition and religious community forms and moulds the identity of believers. The religious way of life is thoroughly different according to this conception depending on the tradition one belongs to. What one values, holds highly, the way one organizes one's life, the values and virtues one strives to achieve, and in the end the person one wants to be, intimately depends on the tradition one belongs to. The fact that people understand who they are, know how they should act in certain conditions and are able to communicate is because they share a way of life. Knowing how to be a Christian implies being raised in the Christian way of life, learning the Christian practices, rituals, values, norms and truths. This way of life, this framework, this specific language is not something one adds to experience but it is rather something which is a priori, which precedes experience. That is, this way of life makes experience, knowledge and action possible. This means that religious experience as well as ethics will be completely different depending on the religious tradition one belongs to. This position concludes that the modern trust shared by the interreligious movements to find an essential religious and ethical language beneath the differences is illusory.

Thus particularistic theologians state that the differences between the ethics of the religions are substantial and they question the value of global ethical declarations. Of course one might say that all religions are for peace, love, hope, justice, human dignity and the protection of

animals. However, these very formal notions and concepts come to mean very different things within each tradition. The stories, rituals and doctrines of each tradition give particular continence to each of these formal ethical terms, and at the level of the concrete religious and ethical praxis of the religious communities the differences are immense:

“Justice [for example] is defined differently by the world’s religious traditions. (...) It is often not easy to find a common language that captures the complexities of what is meant by the term “justice”. (...) there is often a complex understanding of what needs to take place to address injustices and the underlying causes of conflict between people and the world they live in.” (Cilliers, 2003, 51)

Yet, interreligious encounters that do not address these specific interpretations wind up promulgating an empty-box.

b) The end of comprehension across the borders of religious communities

Particularistic theologians often find inspiration within the language philosophy of the late Wittgenstein. He pointed at the fact that there exist various ways of language and introduced the concept of language games. According to Wittgenstein the different language games have their own set of rules and it is not appropriate to apply to all languages the same set of rules. Though Wittgenstein never applied the idea of the different language games to religions or cultures, some theologians and anthropologists see his ideas fit for their particularistic interpretation of religious and cultural diversity. Lindbeck, for example, a theologian of whom we may say that he belongs to the so-called school of particularistic theology, states that religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural-linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. (...) Like a culture or a language it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation/interpretation of those subjectivities. (Lindbeck, 1984,)

The particularistic emphasis on the constitutive character of religious language has serious consequences for interreligious dialogue. Understanding is only possible within the own language or tradition. There is no common language; no essential framework detached from the particular cultural contexts. Thus particularistic theology often leads to a very closed and holistic interpretation of religious languages and life forms. Such an interpretation of Wittgenstein leads to a form of conceptual relativism, which means the end of meaningful dialogue, since it is not possible to transcend the barriers of one’s own culture in order to achieve comprehension. Each community finds itself locked within its own particular worldview. Believers can only speak for their own community. Talking about language games

seems to imply a closed position, where truth, values and norms emerge within a specific cultural context, but do not have any meaning outside the borders of the community. Comprehension across religious borders is not possible, since the differences between the religious traditions are too great and it is not possible to find a common language transcending these differences.

3. A way out of the deadlock

a) Defining the impasse

The above discussion seems to leave us with a deadlock. On the one hand there is the universalistic plea for interreligious dialogue based on the belief in a common religious language or framework. On the other hand we find the pertinent reflections of the particularistic theologians, who teach us that language is constitutive for understanding and that the differences between the various religious traditions are so much bigger than the pluralistic authors can come to acknowledge. Their subsequent denial of a common language seems to be correct, but it does leave us with the unhappy task of pronouncing the death of interreligious dialogue. Religious communities wind up being locked up in their own stories without being able to transcend differences and reaching understanding.

b) The ideal language phantom

It is our contention that this impasse is a consequence of the essentialising way in which some of the crucial concepts within this discussion are used. We find an ongoing process of idealisation within the debate between universalistic and particularistic theologians and it is this process which blocks the solution to the above deadlock. In a way, we could say that both theological perspectives suffer from the same ideal language phantom. (van Brakel, 1998) Ideal here refers to the assumption that there exists some language, which is not-corrupted, not affected, not harmed, not eroded by difference, strangeness or alterity.

A theology that adopts a universal outlook leads to the assumption of a common religious core, which takes either the form of a shared spiritual unity or the form of a ethical core. In any event, this core language is not substantially affected by the stories, narratives or doctrines belonging to divergent traditions. They are mere ways towards this common ideal framework.

With an eye toward the particularists, it could be contended that their entire theology is actually based on the denial of such common language and that they are, unlike the adherents of universalistic theology, capable of doing justice to difference. Whereas the universal thinkers believe in one ideal language, the particularistic theologians offer us an image of diverse languages, which cannot be subsumed to some common denominator. However, behind this acknowledgement of diversity there is an analogous process of essentialisation and idealisation of language taking place. Particularistic theology is just as little capable to relate difference, strangeness and alterity with one's own language. Difference is located outside one's own language and comprehension is only possible within the borders of one's own community. This interpretation of language is just as idealised as the universalistic assumption of a common religious framework. Neither theology succeeds in acknowledging difference within identity. Whereas universalistic theology subsumes difference to commonality, particularistic theologians exclude difference from one's own language.

c) Towards an open, porous and dynamic understanding of language

However, such ideal language is a phantom. This is the case for universalistic theology as well as for particularistic theology. With regard to the universalistic assumption of an essential religious core, we refer to the particularistic reflections on the constitutive character of language. It seems highly unlikely in this perspective that there exists some undifferentiated and unaffected religious ethical essence, which remains the same regardless of the context in which it takes form. The more difficult question is how to take these particularistic concerns seriously without affirming closed forms of theology and ending interreligious dialogue. In order to make some progress with regard to this goal, we will formulate some objections to the particularistic view of language, which refer to the ideal language phantom. More specifically, within particularistic theology the idealisation of language takes the form of a process of reification: "Reification means the process by which social phenomena become independent entities with fixed qualities which receive an ontological status, detached from the specific human practices. (Van Leeuwen, 2002, 187) This process leads to an enlargement of differences and blinds people to possible overlaps between the religions. This process of reification however does not do justice to the existing practices.

The particularistic theologians often present languages in a holistic way as blocks of meaning within which comprehension is possible. Difference is excluded outside the borders of one's

own language. The emphasis lies on the notion of coherence and stability. Langue connects and binds together. Such a presentation of religious tradition runs the risk of becoming ideological, since it does not succeed in acknowledging the strangeness within the own tradition. By strangeness I mean to connote contingency, dynamics, and differences of interpretation within one's own language. Divergent interpretations are not the consequence of a lack of a coherent communal language, but flow from the textual diversity itself: "We need to make a qualifying statement about the unity and diversity of religions. In fact there is so many diversity in each tradition that it often overwhelms unity. Those familiar with Christianity need only recall how many different kinds of Christianity there are. There are such great differences between a simple Quaker service, and enthusiastic Southern Baptist service, and a formal high-church Episcopalian service, that it is sometimes hard to believe they are all examples of the same religion. That kind of diversity is true of every religious tradition. The diversity is as important as the unity, and no form of human religious ness van be understood unless we take both into account." (Fasching & Dechant, 2001, 38)

We state that the particularistic tendency to present languages as closed entities contradicts the "most obvious facts about cultural beliefs, namely that they change through the interaction of different cultures. (...) Wittgensteinians who want to leave things as they are, to respect cultural practices as they exist need to acknowledge that criticizing cultural practices and moving on to new ones is itself a widespread cultural practice." (Placher, 1989,) Languages, religions, cultures are dynamic, interactive and porous. Languages and traditions change: "The legacy of a tradition is again and again kept alive in changing contexts and there exists a continuous interaction with other philosophical and religious traditions." (Vroom, 2000, 106)

This process of re-contextualisation is not something that leaves the essence of the religious language unaltered. It is not the case that only the exterior form of the tradition changes, but that the core idea remains always the same. The substance of the religious language changes throughout history and throughout this interaction with differing contexts. This can be illustrated by referring to the way Christ's crucifixion has been interpreted throughout the history of the church. During the middle ages Christ's death was often understood in terms of the doctrine of satisfaction, as developed by St. Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?*. According to this doctrine, God's honour, having been offended because of the Fall, demands satisfaction. The doctrine of satisfaction teaches that Christ's death abolishes the sin of man and thus realizes forgiveness. Though some theologians still emphasize the appeal of this doctrine, (Swinburne, 1989), many others question its moral acceptability. "How can the death of an innocent man be a ransom? What sort of a God requires propitiation by a death? How can the death of

another expiate my sins? (Hebblethwaite, 1997, 79) Many theologians see a contradiction between Christ's public appearance on the one hand and the doctrine of satisfaction on the other hand. "There is a simple and familiar fact, which sets a question mark over this time-honoured notion. This is the fact that in his own life-time, and without any reference to his death, Jesus taught the love of God and brought men and women into in new and reconciled relationship with him and their heavenly father." (Hick, 1966, 77) Jesus never suggests that his Father is angry, accusing or condemning, or that his death could finally change this situation of damnation. In contemporary theology we see a different image of God emerging. Referring to Luke 15: 11-32 we come to know God as a father who is compassionate and forgiving. Christ's life is a symbol of God's loving kindness. (Moyaert, 2001, 68) Contrary to the image of God that emerges in Anselm's doctrine of satisfaction, Christ's life represents and reveals a loving father.

d) Imagination as the necessary condition for interreligious dialogue

The particularistic picture of religious language as closed entities and of interreligious differences as being absolute is just as ideal and unreal as the assumption of a common religious and ethical framework. Due to the constitutive character of language, the religious differences are far greater than the pluralistic authors can acknowledge, but they are not absolute. The religious other is not an alien from another planet, so to speak.

Particularism suggests a perverted picture of what language actually is and what is needed to achieve comprehension. It is our contention that despite the absence of some common language, comprehension is possible and interreligious dialogue is meaningful. It is helpful in this perspective to turn to some of the insights of intercultural philosophy. Jaap van Brakel for example, who writes on the conditions of intercultural communication, states that we can learn a lot by looking at the initial contacts between people of different cultures who do not share each other's languages. Philosophy should be orientated more inter-culturally, according to his view. van Brakel's study is focused on an analysis of so-called first-contacts, between people who do not share a common language and do not have access to translators. The fact that some of these first contacts prove to be successful, clearly demonstrates that there are no practical reasons for the relativistic concerns of particularistic theology. Diversity cannot be encompassed in a common framework, but this does not end dialogue. There are numerous examples of successful intercultural communications that show that the particularistic presentation of totally incommensurable and closed languages simply does not

jibe with reality. This however does not mean that intercultural or interreligious communication is easy! Nor does it mean that it will always be successful.

What makes interreligious dialogue and comprehension possible is not some a universal religious or ethical language, but it is the human capacity, which we call imagination. Imagination allows people to locate differences and equivalences and questions static and essentialised interpretations of religious languages. Imagination is that human capacity which makes empathy possible and which enables us to cross boundaries and to enter different worlds and perspectives. “Imagination is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called “other” over the years. If those others are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through the strangers’ eyes and hear through their ears. That is because, of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits is to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions.” (Greene, 1995, 3)

What is important with a view on interreligious dialogue is that narratives, symbols and rituals- all those dimension of religious traditions that are insufficiently attended to by the interreligious movement- form the opportunities to enter the world of the other and explore the possibilities that the world of the other present. The primary way in which insights occur and are communicated within religious traditions is through story and ritual rather than through theory. ((Fasching & Dechant, 2001) Particularistic theologians are right when they state that religious traditions form the identity and the behaviour of their believers by the telling of stories and by the performing of ritual practices. Spirituality shapes the character of its members through narrativity and ritual activities such as worship, prayer meditation, fasting and so on, aimed at bringing about a transformation in individual and communal identity. (Fasching & Dechant, 2001) Religious traditions want to incite their believers to a specific way of life. If it is one of the goals of the interreligious movement to promote action for peace, those engaged should realise themselves that common statements and formal declarations only rarely achieve in bringing about a transformation process.

However the narrative character of religious traditions does not bring us back to affirming a closed outlook on religions, since it also reveals something of the inherently multiform and ambiguous nature of each religious tradition, and thus questions the idealised presentation of tradition we often find within particularism. Borders of difference do not always run - and certainly not only-between different religions. Differences are an inevitable part of traditions. Some stories, which belong to the same tradition contradict each other or evoke very

contradictory and conflicting interpretations. This makes the presentation of religious traditions as monolithic unities highly unlikely.

Narratives allow people to recognize themselves in or to identify themselves with one of the characters. Stories provide topics of conversation and succeed in bringing about a real dialogue. Stories create our imagination and it is this capacity that makes empathy and a 'crossing over' possible. Interreligious dialogue is the place where we can listen to the stories of religious others and enter their world. Thus it is not so much through the promulgation of common statements, but rather through the listening to religious narratives that it becomes possible to enter the world of the religious other. "We are called upon to use our imaginations to enter into the world [of the other], to discover what it looks like and feels from the vantage point of the person whose world it is. That does not mean that we approve of it or even necessarily appreciate it. It does mean that we extend our experience sufficiently to grasp it as a human possibility." (Greene, 1994, 5) When one opens oneself to the narratives of the other by means of the imagination, interreligious dialogue becomes the place of a new theology and a creative identity and as such the deadlock between the particularistic concerns and the interreligious movement can be transcended.

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