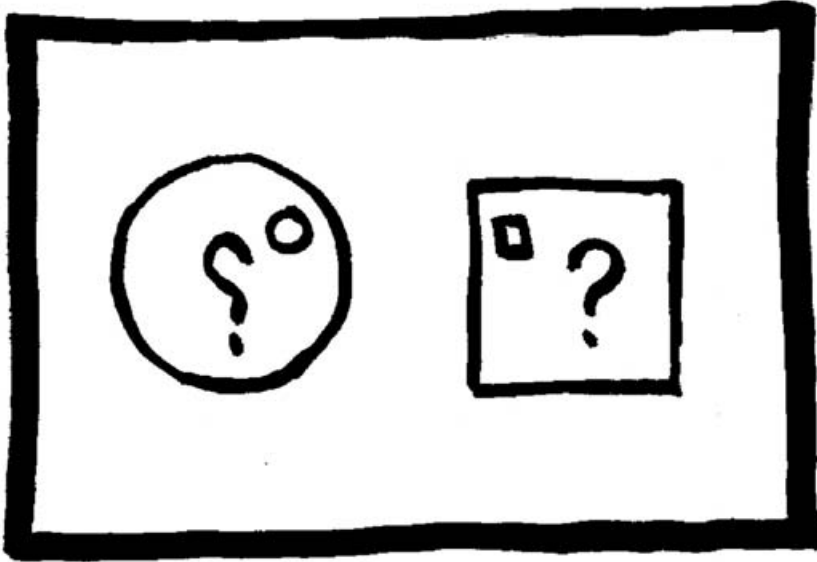


9/11 and Choices for Dialogue

ALAN RACE



Encounter; original art; Lonnie Hanzon

FRAMING THE QUESTION OF DIALOGUE

“Where were you when JFK was assassinated?” For some time, following the killing of President John F. Kennedy in 1963, that was a common question. The question itself was indicative of how the killing was being situated in a nation’s psyche. JFK was the first Catholic president of the USA, and therefore an embodiment of the American Dream that anyone could rise to be the nation’s Commander in Chief, irrespective of background and religious affiliation. Some said that he represented hope at the dawn of the 1960s social revolutions. In other words, here was a cultural moment in a nation’s history which was being held up as revelatory in some sense: a turning-point when national fortunes were dashed on the rock of shocking violence.

Now ask yourself an updated version of the same question? ‘Where were you on 9/11?’ When the world allegedly changed. Has 9/11 assumed a revelatory status

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comparable with the killing of JFK? Was this too a painful realisation that the American Dream – now in its post Cold War phase – remains a fragile myth? Or was it revelatory of what the Italian-American novelist, Don DeLillo, has chillingly estimated – that “only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith, is taken seriously in modern society.” (from his novel, *Falling Man*, 2007). Even if this exaggerates what is the case, it is sufficiently shocking for most believers’ ears, that its possibility has triggered a fundamental reassessment of the place and truth of religious commitment itself.

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Certainly 9/11 has become the occasion for an outpouring of many texts, seeking to explain the link between religion and violence. There has also been an exponential increase in texts dealing with the dialogue between religions, many of which seem predicated on the belief that such dialogue will help to renew the credibility of religious commitment *per se* post 9/11.

All of this raises a question for the dialogical enthusiast who may have been building bridges of mutual understanding between religions and world-views for many years. The question

is this: should the dialogue between religions be reframed as a response to what is now called religiously-motivated violence? There is pressure to do just this – from government, civil society, the academy and religious institutions themselves, and it is understandable.

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However, I believe that the answer needs to be more nuanced than this. My own provisional answer therefore is this: yes, the dialogue must face head-on the ugliness of religion’s seeming enslavement to violence, yet there are many dimensions to the dialogue and it may be that in the long run the answer to religiously-motivated violence lies in the renewal of the religions themselves through dialogical encounter at levels which ask hard questions about religious claims to truth in relation both to one another and to what we know from human enquiry through the sciences and humanities more generally.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

9/11 injected a massive shock into the US psyche and into the psyche of all western-style democracies. The Cold War had ended but now a different war seemed to have been declared. Some of us had heard that may be politicised

Islam was becoming a substitute enemy to take the place of USSR. If this was the case, then it made 9/11 look like an opening salvo. The problem is that the salvo worked. The West would react and confirm the suspicions of those elements in the Muslim world which accused the West of a new kind of colonialism, now pursued under the cloak of economic globalisation.

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If the international political community was disturbed deeply by 9/11, then the same was true of the international interreligious dialogue community. To date, that dialogue endeavour had poured its ink out mainly on the philosophical problems of how to interpret a growing sense of a global religious plurality in the light of specific religious claims. One might say that this was the classical problem of the “One and the Many” in a new key. Is plurality what the religions should expect from their perceptions of God – how does Christianity, Islam, Hinduism etc understand themselves now in relation to a diversity which the globalising world has brought into sharp relief? This is a discussion, moreover, which had been generating some sophisticated exchanges over roughly the last 40 years.

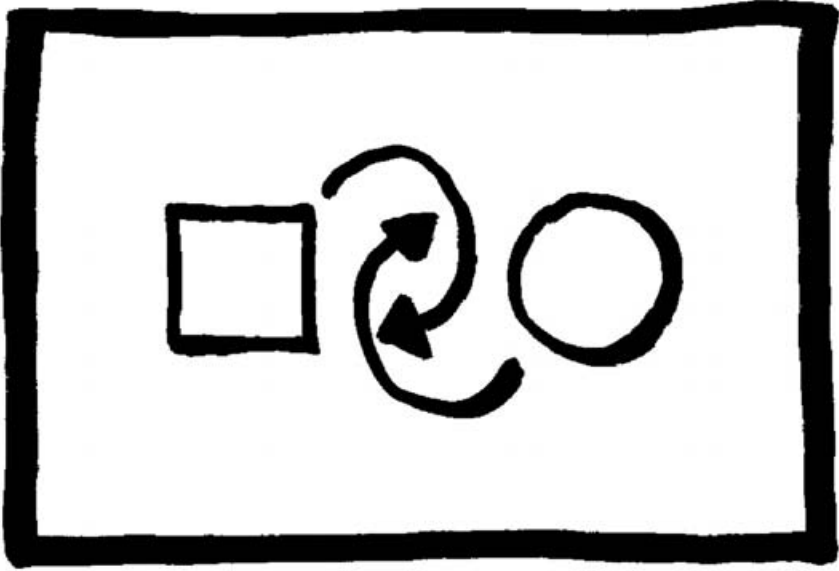
Then came the cataclysmic rupture. On the surface the attack seemed senseless, but those who knew what

was stirring in the corridors religious fundamentalism were surprised only by the monstrous audacity of the act. Of course there had been examples of atrocity before in the name of religious anger – documented graphically and analysed

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sharply in most recent times by Mark Juergensmeyer in his book, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Univ. California Press, 2000), and which cited Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist and Jewish examples. These were all instances of what he termed “performative violence”. 9/11, which occurred after the book’s publication, has become the most dramatic, even iconic, performative violent act so far. In this sense, 9/11 has changed everything.

Therefore, for those of us promoting the dialogue between religions, 9/11 was a summons to come out of the ivory tower. For dialogue to be useful it must needs address this under-belly of religiously-motivated violence. Mahatma Gandhi had already said that non-violence was part of the truthfulness of a religion, part of its core affirmation. Any view of life which claimed a spiritual origin, he believed, was by definition seeking the supreme good for the world and therefore violence could not be a part of such a view. Since 9/11 there has been much agonising about how religions can become instruments of violence.



Engagement: original art, Lonnie Hanzon

TWO APPROACHES TO DIALOGUE

If Gandhi said that we can't solve the truthfulness problem in religion without sorting out religious pretensions to violence, then my thesis is that the opposite might also be the case: we can't solve peace problems without attending also to the philosophical problems of how religions interpret the world and their relations with one another.

These two views of the dialogical task for today are reflected in two well-known formulations from two seasoned scholars in the field:

The philosophical/epistemological framing:

"Dialogue, especially dialogue in the religious – and ideological – area, is not simply a series of conversations. It is a whole new way of thinking, a way of seeing

and reflecting on the world, and its meaning."

(Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute: the Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection*, 1990)

The ethical framing:

"No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.

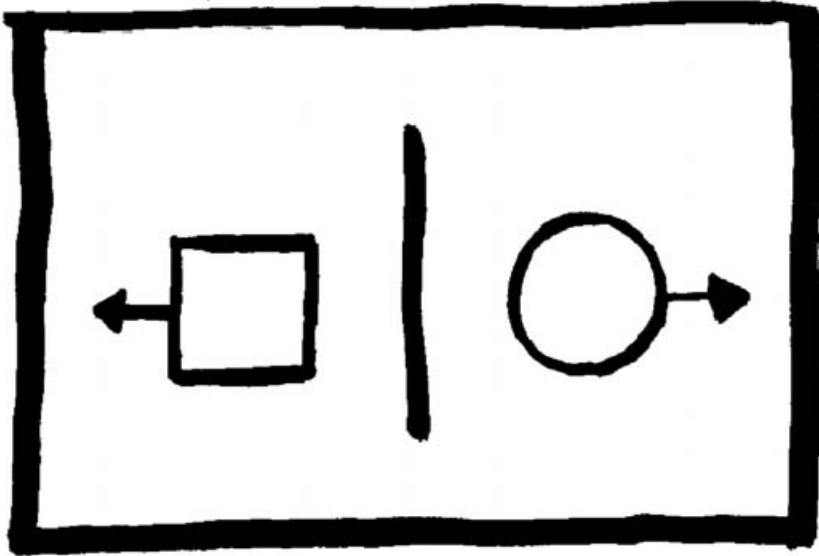
No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions."

(Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility*, ET, London: SCM Press, 1991)

These two approaches articulate almost competing directions for schol-

ars of interfaith relations today. And it is this competition – if that is what it amounts to – that I believe we need to penetrate more closely if we are to gain a better perspective on the clamour to claim 9/11 as a moment of revelatory impact.

The post-Colonial context has been especially significant in relation to the struggle of political Islam against the West. The 9/11 attacks were directed against the essential instruments of American power – the World Trade Centre as economic power, the Pentagon



Estrangement; original art, Lonnie Hanson

WIDER CONTEXT

Let me now set out two features of the wider context in this struggle between competing claims for our dialogical attention. The first is the naming of our historical period as post-colonial, which is characterised by the reassertion of religious identity as grounds for forging political identity. This is true for many ideologies and places – for example, Hindu Nationalism for India, Sikh Separatism for Punjab, Jewish Settlers for Israel, Christian Supremacists for the USA, or Al-Quaeda for Muslim rule across the Muslim world.

as military power, and the White House as political power (if this was indeed the target of the third plane whose mission was foiled when passengers fought back, causing the plane to crash land in Pennsylvania before it could strike). The

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attacks were highly planned and were not about killing individuals but about striking at the structures of power. If we ask about the intentions of the attacks the answer is not entirely clear. Was it to

de-stabilise the perceived superior power of the USA? Or disturb the complacency of Western victory in the Cold War? Was it to rally other Muslims in the cosmic battle between the “House of Peace” (Islam) and “House of War” (the rest of us) and establish a renewed caliphate? We don’t fully know.

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The second context is the revitalised discussion about the secularisation thesis in the western study of religion. The secularisation thesis assumed the demise of religious affiliation in the wake of modernity, but now 9/11 literally seems to blow that thesis apart. Religion, it might be said, has blasted its way back into public debate. This is obviously not a happy state of affairs. Even if the democratic state doesn’t want to “do God”, it seems it has at least to take account of the fact that there are citizens out there for whom “God” represents a higher authority than democratic institutions and the voting public. In a democracy the rulers are meant to be held to account for their policies and activities, and some people will rely on their religious compass for

discerning how to render our political masters accountable. Therefore religion matters, at least in this minimal sense, for the political process. But because weariness over 16th century religious wars in Europe was a major factor in the desire to abandon the theocratic state there is bound to be nervousness about welcoming religious voices back into public debate. 9/11 is the worst nightmare for those wary of questioning the social contract of modernity and the general acceptance that religion should remain a private affair.

Those two contexts have led to the default position in many minds, that religion is responsible for all violence in the world. Hence this well-known accusation from Sam Harris:

*Non-believers like myself stand
beside you dumbstruck by the
Muslim hordes who chant death
to whole nations of the living.
But we stand dumbstruck by you
as well –
by your denial of tangible reality,
by the suffering you create in ser-
vice of your religious myths
and by your attachment to an
imaginary God.*

(Sam Harris, *Letter to a
Christian Nation*, Knopf,
2006)

Notice how Harris yokes together three anti-religious motives:

*Psychological flaws of religion – it
prevents us from facing up to
reality*

*Immoral outcomes of religion – it is
a source of harm
Philosophical groundlessness of religion – it is irrational.*

All three accusations identified by Harris have been well-rehearsed since Enlightenment. But in actuality all three accusations are not necessarily so well founded as Harris's polemic imagines. First, there is evidence that religious the accusation that religion is the source of all harm, violence, and warfare ignores the fact that it is also the source of much altruism and compassion in the world

people are no less well-adjusted psychologically compared to others: the mechanisms which help them to deal with life's transitoriness and anxieties simply lie in spiritual practice. And the science of human happiness places priority on "spiritual well-being" as an indicator of all-round human health. Secondly, the accusation that religion is the source of all harm, violence, and warfare ignores the fact that it is also the source of much altruism and compassion in the world. Finally, the fact that religious commitment stretches beyond the narrowly rational does not render it irrational. In fact there are fascinating debates now stemming from quantum mechanics and cosmology which argue for a priority of consciousness over materialism, and this raises again the possibility of the reality of God without accusations of irrationality.

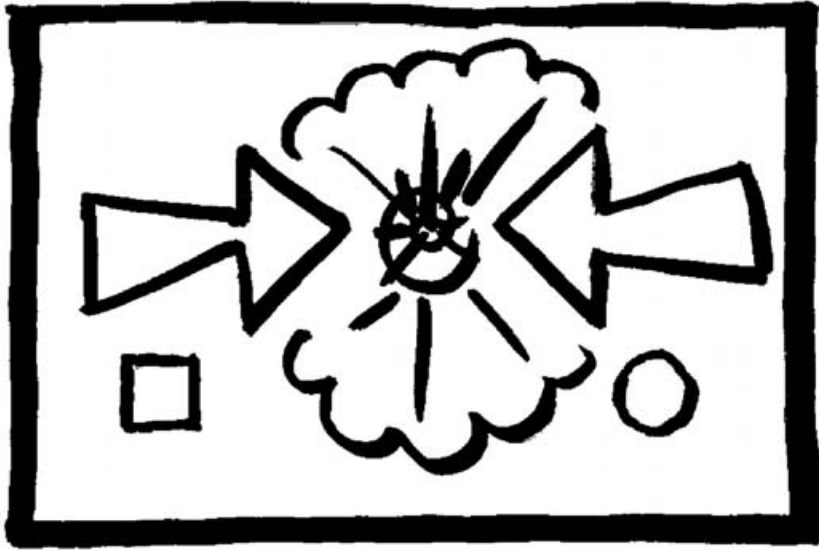
In other words, Harris's accusations spring from his atheist philosophical materialism and not from an examination of all of the evidence. The debate between believers and atheists is obviously an important debate in its own right, but this is not the same as determining questions of where violence-allied-to-religion springs from and what its perpetrators think religion is for. And it is worth remembering that the worst atrocities of the 20th century were set in train by non-religious ideologies – Communist gulags, Nazi National Socialism, Cultural Revolution in China.

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE

So we turn now to the reasons for violent conflict. There are many of them, but here are three main ones:

1. *Grievances – about land, resources or a perceived injustice.*
2. *Seeking revenge for unresolved historic antagonism.*
3. *Old fashioned ideology or empire expansionism.*

We know that religion is often enlisted to bless other motives based on grievance, historic mistrust or empire expansionism. To have transcendent backing lends an almost unlimited force to your actions and cloaks the actions in a supposed moral authority. However, it is far from clear that religion itself is the culprit. So the British philosopher of religion, Keith Ward, contends:



Conflict; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

What makes beliefs evil is not religion, but hatred, ignorance, the will to power, and indifference to others.¹

If this is the case, the most one can say is that religion has been powerless to prevent conflict. Blessing conflict, it turns out, is really a form of powerlessness to prevent it!

Nevertheless, enlisting religion for blessing evil intentions, which have been formulated in relation to other factors, cannot be the sole explanation for religiously-motivated violence. Ward's separation of the evils of intention from direct causation in religious systems and beliefs I think is reasonable, as far it goes. But this abuse-of-religion argument is not sufficient to explain religiously-motivated violence fully. There is a category of religious commitment

which issues in violence more directly: there are some religious roots to violent conflict. Needless to say, for the vast majority of religious people religious violence represents a perversion of faith.

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The clue as to the marriage of religion and violence can be discerned from the left luggage locker at Boston's Logan Airport, following 9/11:

Tame your soul, purify it, convince it, make it understand, and incite it ... Bless your body with some verses of the Qur'an – this is done by reading verses into one's hands, and then rubbing the hands over whatever is to be blessed – the luggage, clothes, the knife, your personal effects, your ID, your passport ... The rest is left to God, the best one to depend on ... We will all meet in the highest heaven, God willing.²

This seems more than simply enlisting divine help for violence based on other causes. Note how the intimacy between the Qur'an and instruments of attack seems almost sexual. The religious blessing here is not simply an external aid to a malevolent deed. There are specific religious motivations at work.

Fortunately, we know what these factors are:

- *a Manichaeist worldview of Good vs. Evil, where Evil is always the possession of the other who can therefore be labelled “enemy”*
- *an egoism which poses oneself as God's instrument of salvation*
- *literalism about chosen texts which claim “God on my side”*
- *an exclusivist absolutism about religious truth.*

I believe that these factors can be applied across the religious board. At this point Sam Harris is correct - this is a combination of irrationality, immorality and psychological malfunction. But Harris's difficulty is that he can't see how this is also anathema to the vast majority of religiously committed people, institutions and scholars.

Making statements does bring about peace. Nonetheless, they can be part of the “background noise” for developing a culture of peace.

Given this history, how might the religions help? Often ‘dialogue’ is proposed as a greater part of the solution. So here's a provisional definition of dialogue from a long-time practitioner, Dr. Paul Mojzes, from Rosemont College, Pennsylvania, USA:

Dialogue is a way by which persons or groups of different persuasions respectfully and responsibly relate to one another in order to bring about mutual enrichment without removing essential differences between them.³

Although this is not going to solve every problem, it is the kind of approach which has propelled a great deal of momentum for dialogue internationally and regionally. For example, here is a statement which echoes exactly Mojzes sentiments:

*A Multi-Religious Statement
Condemning Violence Targeting
a Jerusalem Yeshiva
8 March 2008*

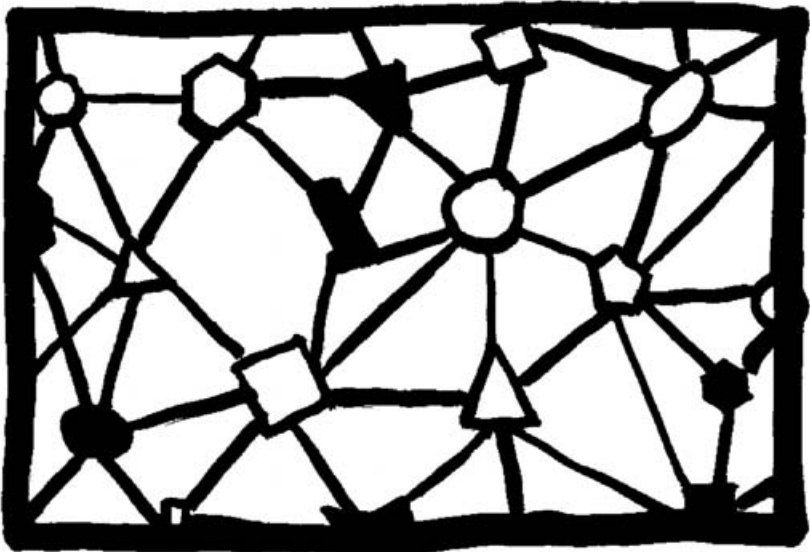
“We – Muslim, Jewish, and Christian – decry the violent attack targeting the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva in Jerusalem this week. The murder of eight students is a tragedy for all people of faith.

The way to advance peace in the region is for religious communities to cooperate, forging an alliance grounded in the moral principles shared by every faith tradition. As Muslim, Jew, and Christian, we are all bound by a common heritage of spiritual struggle under one God. Our collective voice and moral authority is greater than each of us stand-

ing alone. Together, we can help calm the rising hostilities and soothe the wounded and the grieving. Each of us is responsible for the well-being and safety of the other. This is a notion of “shared security” that Religions for Peace has helped advance in the international community.”

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What dialogue does is to clear away stereotypes, forge openings for the conciliation of historical grievances, help participants learn to value the other as they value themselves, develop criteria for spotting perversity in religious interpretation, and accept some measure of mutuality in discerning what believing in today’s critical thinking world really amounts to.



Pluralisms; original art, Lonnie Hanson

DISMANTLING ABSOLUTISM

In these respects, interreligious dialogue is more than conflict resolution work. It involves us in the dismantling of absolutisms. Modesty about our truth claims seems needed more and more. But of course it is this thrust within dialogue which remains its most controversial aspect. However, critical thinking

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can also help us. For critical thinking has involved us in recognising the partiality of what we affirm – something which is as true for secularist beliefs as for religious ones. We each have a partial perspective on the whole. In this sense religion is not an add-on to a firmly grounded secularist base-line. Most of us need to absorb a little more humility in the ways we talk. The dialogue world sees this as one of its central contributions to human knowing.

Why do we need this approach especially in religion? We need it because it is the exclusivity of religious worldviews which renders other worldviews threatening and therefore worthy of extermination. Medieval theologians used to talk of heresy as a poison threatening the life of a city. If someone was going to put poison in the water supply and the only way you could stop it was by killing that person, you would have to do it. You might regret it; you might wish

life was arranged differently, but you would have to do it. Similarly, if your total good – salvation – was threatened then whatever or whoever was doing the threatening you would have to stop them, by killing if necessary. Hence you

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had religious permission to kill heretics as a moral act. When the western powers say that today's religious militants hate our freedoms and are threatening our freedoms they are arguing in a similar manner. "Our freedoms" functions in this case as another form of the human good or "salvation". The enemy is poisoning the water. More than that, they nearly stopped the whole system on 9/11. A colleague puts it like this:

*The use of violence ... 'is employed in order to defend and protect the saving truth and thus the ultimate well-being of the people against the perceived threat coming from the religious other.'*⁴

So the search for peace is linked to philosophical/epistemological questions after all. Hans Küng is right that there can be no peace in the world without peace between religions, and that this in turn demands dialogue between reli-

gions. 9/11 has made this abundantly clear. But for that dialogue to succeed it needs to tackle issues in religious epistemology and this has always been the deeper purpose of interreligious dialogue. In this sense, 9/11 should not frame the reasons for dialogue exclusively.

Let me bring my concerns together in a quotation from John Hick, one of the giants in the philosophy of religion, and which seems to fold together the twin emphases of Swidler and Küng cited above:

*No true peace among the world religions without the recognition by each that the others are different but equally valid responses to the ultimate divine Reality that we call God.*⁵

Of course if you could pull this trick off you would probably qualify for a Nobel prize for peace and philosophy.

NOTES

¹ *Is Religion Dangerous?*, Lion Publishing, 2006, p. 38.

² Cited by Oliver McTernan, *Violence in God's Name*, London: DLT, 2003, p. 22

³ Paul Mojzes, 'The What and the How of Dialogue,' in M. Darrol Bryant and Frank Flinn, eds., *Interreligious Dialogue: Voices from a New Frontier*, New York: Paragon House, 1989, pp. 199-206.

⁴ Perry Schmidt-Leukel, 'The Struggle for Peace: Can Religions Help?', *Interreligious Insight*, April 2007.

⁵ John Hick, *Disputed Questions in the Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, Macmillan, 1993, p. 162.