

Interreligious dialogue as a myth



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The authors aim in this article to show why it is extremely difficult to expect representatives of missionary religions to engage in productive interreligious dialogue. The article demonstrates how the imperative to convert, which is rooted in a sense of epistemic authority that one holds the best version of truth, precludes interreligious dialogue among religionists. The authors note, on the one hand, that the primary condition for any dialogue is that each of those involved come to the dialogue intellectually humble. On the other hand, the authors note that for missionary religionists to embrace intellectual humility requires a fundamental rethink of their claims of epistemological certainty and final epistemic authority. This implies abandoning the missionary mandate and witnessing built on a sense of intellectual certainty and pride. The authors therefore argue that intellectual humility is a necessary condition for productive interreligious dialogue. Because representatives of missionary religions claim certainty about the knowledge they espouse, what is paraded as interreligious dialogue is largely a myth. It will remain a mere concept that yields little to no tangible result unless these representatives embrace intellectual humility, which is more achievable within a secularist framework.

Contribution: This research contributes to the seemingly easy but difficult discourse and practice about interreligious dialogue. It brings to the limelight a more appropriate conception of dialogue in the context of interreligious dialogue, and explains how side-lining that conception empties the predominant practice of interreligious dialogue. This contribution is useful to HTS, which focuses on theological and religious studies, as well as critical study of religions.

Keywords: interreligious dialogue; myth; intellectual humility; epistemic authority; secular.

Introduction

Dialogic demands and the politics of epistemic primacy have paradoxically remained central features of modern Christian Church history. The authors consider this a paradox because every demand for dialogue presupposes epistemic equality with regard to the possibility that each participant in the dialogue knows 'something', can contribute substantially to the dialogue and is willing to shift grounds as a result of compromises from the dialogue. To admit such equality implies that none of the participants in the dialogue lays claim to an *a priori* and eternal, epistemic primacy regarding truth. The question of epistemic authority is a fundamental theoretical and methodological issue in discourses around the politics of religion. It affects approaches to discourses around religions because, among other things, it has to be specified methodologically what issues to be included in the discourse, what approach to take in addressing the issues, who can be involved, and so on.

Despite the importance of the issue of epistemic authority in the politics of religion, it is the most taken for granted by many scholars of religion and also, therefore, the least explored topic. This is despite the many official and exciting comments about interreligious dialogue by leaders and scholars of world religions (see Articles from Declarations by Vatican Council II 1962–65; Karlstroem 1954; Swidler 2013). So while the proponents of interreligious dialogue provide an impressive history of the idea and process (Swidler 2013:3–19), the authors aim in this article to show why it is extremely difficult to expect representatives of missionary religions to engage in productive interreligious dialogue. The article argues that the imperative to convert and witness to one's religious convictions, which is rooted in a sense of epistemic authority that one holds the best version of truth, precludes interreligious dialogue (Cornille 2013). The authors note, on the one hand, that the primary condition for every dialogue is that each of those involved come to the dialogue intellectually humble. On the other hand, the authors note that for religionists to embrace intellectual humility, it requires a fundamental rethink of their claims of epistemological certainty

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and final epistemic authority. This means abandoning the missionary mandate built on a sense of intellectual certainty and pride. All the features of intellectual humility are rarely possible within the framework of missionary religion. Hence, the authors broaden their argument to include that outside the frameworks of secularism, interreligious dialogue is largely empty talk. So to reduce global and national conflicts that result from disagreements among zealous religionists, firstly, there is a need to pursue a broad recognition of secularism in theory and practice, then achieve intellectual humility and only then *begin* to aim for peace in regions torn apart by religion-induced conflicts.

To achieve its aim, this contribution is divided into three sections after this introduction and before the conclusion. In the first section, the authors clarify in what sense they are using the term 'dialogue' in 'interreligious dialogue'. In the second section, the authors demonstrate why and how interreligious dialogue is a myth. In the third section, they show why the primary condition for a successful interreligious dialogue is intellectual humility and how this virtue is better assured within the secularist framework. For this last reason, the authors arrive at their conclusion that in concrete practice – beyond councils, movements and conferences – interreligious dialogue is a myth.

The 'dialogue' in 'interreligious dialogue'

In this section, the authors first explore various perspectives and implications of the term 'dialogue' in the expression 'interreligious dialogue'. Then, they specify which perspective informed their argument in this article.

The authors take religion to mean an aspect of culture which focuses on a society's beliefs, understanding and expressions about transcendental experiences, ultimate meaning and reality, as well as rituals and practices that derive from and imply reverence to the transcendent reality. Cornille (2013:24) explained that what unites various definitions of religion is their pointer to 'the ways in which humans have given expression (in myth, ritual, ethical systems, and institutional structures) to their relationship with some transcendent reality'. The term 'interreligious' means interaction among religions, as can be imagined among Christians, Muslims, Hindus, African traditional religionists, and so on. This is different from an intrareligious interaction, which may be explored among members of different sects of the same religion, for example, among Anglicans, Catholics and Methodists. So what do the authors mean by 'dialogue' and how can it be qualified by 'interreligious'?

According to Swidler (2013:5–6), there are three primary modes of interreligious dialogue. These include dialogue of the head, dialogue of the hands and dialogue of the heart. The first mode implies reaching out to learn from other religions or ideologies about the meaning of life. The second implies joining with members of other religions to make the world better. The third demands 'an awe-filled embrace of the inner

spirit and aesthetic expressions of the Other'. Swidler described these manifestations of interreligious dialogue as the 'magnetic lodestone that has been drawing the rest of the globe into its paradigm shift' (Swidler 2013:6). This last point about the 'lodestone' will be explored later in this reflection. In the views of Cornille (2013:20), the term dialogue in 'interreligious dialogue' is used in four ways. The first is dialogue as 'peaceful coexistence and friendly exchanges'. The second is dialogue as 'active engagement with the teachings and practices of the other'. The third is dialogue as 'cooperation toward social change'. The fourth is dialogue as 'participation in common prayers and in the ritual life of the other'.

Cornille's first definition of interreligious dialogue aligns with Swidler's first mode (dialogue of the head). Her third definition also aligns with Swidler's second mode (dialogue of the hand – which involves activities for social change). Her fourth definition aligns with Swidler's third and last mode, which involves participation in each other's rituals, prayers and aesthetic expressions. Cornille's second conception of interreligious dialogue sees it as 'active engagement with the teachings and practices of the other'. This all-important part of every religious tradition drives the differences among religions, and it is missing in Swidler's conception. None of Swidler's three modes touches the core beliefs of any religious tradition. All of them involve peripheral exchanges and engagements that do not demand doctrinal adjustments as a result of learning from others. This means that Swidler's articulation of what can be involved in an interreligious dialogue is limited; Cornille's is richer. Based on Swidler's conception of interreligious dialogue, which evades core issues about doctrines and beliefs, it is understandable why his report of the history of interreligious dialogue is filled with expressions of excitement in words such as 'magnetic lodestone', 'Field of Force', '...opened the dam for the dialogue among the religions of the world' (Swidler 2013:6), leading to 'the 21st century state of inter-religious dialogue' where the 'dialogue is now spreading in all the societal structures of the globe, moving humanity in the direction of a Global Dialogical Civilization' (Swidler 2013:17). Having explained these, the authors submit that their use of the term 'dialogue' with respect to 'interreligious' focuses on Cornille's second conception, namely as 'active engagement with the teachings and practices of the other'. This is the conception of interreligious dialogue that they adopted in this study. The others do not involve dialogue as a process of open, mutual learning with the intent to understand better, to grow and to be transformed. They are better captured as mutual interreligious participation in and the aesthetic observation of the religious activities of religious others.

The authors' adoption of an aspect of Cornille's (2013) definition is with reservation. This is because of the element of witnessing she considered important for a definition of dialogue. According to her:

[W]hile dialogue is often regarded as a friendly exchange of information about beliefs and practices, mission or evangelization is seen to involve an attempt to convince the other of the truth of those teachings and practices. (p. 23)

In her view, this understanding of dialogue ‘tends to create a false dichotomy ... It also tends to deprive dialogue of its energy and zeal’ whereas ‘dialogue may be regarded as a form of mutual or reciprocal witnessing’ (Cornille 2013:23–24). In these words, Cornille argued that evangelisation of or witnessing to one’s beliefs is a necessary feature of a dialogue. The authors’ position in this regard is that what dialogue demands is not mutual evangelisation or witnessing but mutual search and mutual willingness to learn from and grow with the other. The authors’ reason is that ‘witnessing’ sustains the element of defence of one’s beliefs. Such a default position to a supposed dialogue empties the dialogue such that it fails before it even starts. The authors therefore define interreligious dialogue as an active engagement with the teachings and practices of religious others, in collaboration with those others, and in mutual willingness to search together, learn together, grow together and adjust beliefs and practices as a result of what is learnt. It is based on this definition that the authors describe interreligious dialogue as a myth.

Like the authors, Pratt (2021:199) acknowledged a tension in two broad conceptions of interreligious dialogue. The first is a desire for interreligious dialogue as an engagement among ‘religions as complex systems of belief and thought for the purposes of seeking and deepening theological understanding on the one hand’. The second is a prioritised engagement in interreligious dialogue as ‘relationships between persons of different faiths for the purposes of social peace and harmony, and working together for a greater common good’. The latter part of the tension is possible, more easily achievable and therefore highly successful around the world. It is this part of the tension that Swidler emphasised. The former part is the source of the tension and is more deserving to be described as ‘interreligious dialogue’. It is good enough to describe the latter as ‘interfaith relations’, to use Pratt’s (2021:179) description. Because the core issue is with the first part of the tension, Pratt (2021) admitted that:

[B]y the late 20th century a turn towards engaging in relationship between peoples of different faiths, in light of local specific contexts and the multiplicity of religious identities and orientations ... all but eclipsed discursive theological dialogue. (p. 199)

A reason for the eclipse can be found in the third of Neufeldt’s (2011:349) three key objectives of interreligious dialogue, namely that such a dialogue should enhance a transformation of one’s own beliefs while engaging with someone of another faith. But which religionist is willing to transform because of their engagement with others? This is the heart of the tension. Cornille admitted that the problem is that doing so ‘may be perceived as an expression of weakness or insufficiency’ (Cornille 2013:24). Neufeldt explained that people fear this third view of interreligious dialogue because it ‘may produce negative syncretism’ (Neufeldt 2011:349). This is the root of the eclipse hinted by Pratt. It is also the root of the solution the authors offer in this study. For now, they make the claim that the reason for that lingering eclipse of the main focus of interreligious dialogue is because those who conceived the

dialogue lacked the intellectual disposition to push it through. So from that first perspective, and since that eclipse, the project was emptied. Neufeldt only admitted that a pursuit of interreligious dialogue that does not include this element of transformation of one’s perceptions and belief implies engaging in superficial double monologue. The authors submit that any claim to an honest pursuit of productive interreligious dialogue among missionary religionists is a myth. But any attempt at interreligious dialogue which does not confront the implications of this perspective to interreligious dialogue and still expects to achieve peaceful co-existence of different religions, according to Dijkhuizen (2015:349), is a utopic attempt.

The history of attempts at interreligious engagements has much to report. Swidler’s (2013) account of some of the earliest events and the 21st century state of the process is particularly impressive and sufficient for this contribution. According to him, the Enlightenment as the birth of the modern era is the turning point in favour of interactions among people of various cultures and religious traditions. He outlined several events that culminated in what is predominantly described as interreligious dialogue. Remarkable among such events are the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, the launching of the Christian Ecumenical Movement during the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, the 1925 first international conference of the Movement for Life and Work, the 1927 first World Conference of the Movement for Faith and Order and the 1948 conference of the World Council of Churches. These initial efforts were among Christians, excluding the Catholic Church. Heft (2011:6) had the same view when he reported that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ‘Protestants took the lead in calling for dialogues among Christians; they were called ecumenical dialogues – that is, dialogues focused on mutual understanding and greater collaboration and unity among Christians’. Other remarkable events were the Vatican Council II (1962–65), the 2007 public letter (‘A Common Word Between Us’) by 138 Muslim scholars and religious leaders from around the world and the 2008 World Conference on Dialogue, among others. Regarding the Vatican Council II, Heft (2011:7) added that it ‘opened the Catholic Church to interreligious dialogue’.

In Swidler’s (2013:10–13) view, the changes that resulted from cultural interactions led to the awareness of relationality. The latter defined six other reasons for the rise of dialogue, namely historicism, intentionality, sociology of knowledge, limits of language, hermeneutics and dialogue. A seventh reason, according to Swidler, is the rise of the scientific study of religion. Whereas Swidler (2013) emphasised the impact of the Enlightenment era in the West on the rise of what he conceived as interreligious dialogue, Pratt’s (2021:179) emphasis was on ‘the rising influence of Asian and African Christian leadership and engagement during the 20th century in respect of both the Vatican ... and the WCC’. Exploring this distinction is outside the scope of this article. The authors will explain why they think interreligious dialogue, understood in the way they have defined it in this

article, is a myth. They took this position bearing in mind Freeman's (2017:155) question whether the problem at stake outweighs the solution. What is meant here as 'the problem' is the proven inability of missionary religionists around the world to achieve productive interreligious dialogue at the level of faith, order and doctrine. The authors' answer is that the core solution is sidelined; so what remains is inadequate to solve the problem it pretends to solve. This is why they describe what is being done as a myth.

How interreligious dialogue is a myth

[D]ialogue – fundamentally meaning 'I can learn from you' – is a dagger pointed at the heart of absolutist religion/ideology. (Swidler 2013:3)

In this section, the authors argue that the idea of interreligious dialogue is a myth. They demonstrate this using two routes. The first is based on Swidler's metaphoric articulation that dialogue is a 'dagger' at the heart of absolutist religions. Secondly, the authors demonstrate that because most of the world religions are missionary in character and lay claim to epistemic authority, this dagger forecloses possibilities of committed practice of interreligious dialogue. The authors use the term 'myth' in this context to mean a commonly held false notion or an idea or a story that has either no basis in reality or cannot be brought into reality.

The implications of the remark by Swidler will be explored next. The authors defined dialogue as fundamentally meaning that an individual or a group can learn from another. This implies, firstly, that in the process of learning, the learner takes the position of one in need of insight and understanding of reality. It also implies that there is this 'other' who can 'teach' the learner. At the time of teaching and on the issue with regard to which he or she will serve as a teacher, he or she is in a position of epistemic authority, at least regarding a specific situation of learning. More importantly, both the 'teacher' and the 'learner' are exploring together. But each of the absolutist religions lays claim to divine, absolute revelation of truths and principles. For this reason, the divine agent personified in his representatives is the only recognised, primary epistemic authority. So there is, in principle and practice, no possibility of any other 'teacher' who can exercise epistemic authority on an adherent of a religion that lays claim to divine revelation of truths and principles. Therefore, to invite an adherent of such a religion into a dialogue will most likely be fruitless. And it is within this context that the latter part of Swidler's description comes into clearer relief, namely that to invite absolutist religionists to a dialogue is equivalent to confronting them with a dagger. Who wants to be pierced with a dagger?

So how does this relate to Christianity and Islam, for instance, which are clearly known for old and new efforts at missionary activities? To invite them to a dialogue is to question the justification for their missionary orientation. A request for such justification is a request to rethink what they are and do from ground zero. But how many religionists are willing to

have others question their identity from ground zero? If the ground is rooted in the existence of an unquestionable and indubitable being, then such a questioning is intolerable. This is why, again, the authors think that Swidler's picture of when dialogue can become a dagger is both *ad rem* and insightful. A request to question one's identity from ground zero is possible by humanists but impossible for those whose identity is based on the existence of a sacred being. An absolutist religionist would rather pick up their dagger to defend this identity. All known world religions lay claim to one form of sacred being or the other. In each case, the being is the absolute epistemic authority. So when they dialogue with each other, which of these beings will be allowed to assume authority – at least on a single issue? It is extremely difficult for religionists to get around this question. The authors therefore think that as excellent and progressive as the history of interreligious dialogue may be presented (see Swidler's presentation), the practice is a myth. The texts from the history of interreligious dialogue will be examined to explore this point.

The 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions is considered the public and formal launching and birth of modern interreligious dialogue. Swidler (2013) reported that:

The 'trigger' of the positive explosion of inter-religious dialogue at the parliament was provided by the Indian Hindu Swami Vivekananda. He began his address in these words: 'Sisters and brothers of America!' To these words, Swami got a standing ovation from a crowd of seven thousand, which lasted for two minutes. (p. 6)

Vivekananda added later:

[I] do not come to convert you to a new belief. I want you to keep your own belief; I want to make the Methodist a better Methodist; the Presbyterian a better Presbyterian ... I want to teach you to live the truth, to reveal the light within your own soul. (Swidler 2013:6)

Swidler presented those words by Vivekananda as signs of openness for dialogue. But those texts contain indications of a dialogue that is unreal. Vivekananda is reported to have authoritatively informed believers in other religions that he had come 'to make them' better versions of what they were before meeting him and to 'teach' them to 'live the truth, to reveal the light within' their souls. In the authors' view, this means that the speaker is coming into the dialogue from a position of epistemic superiority. Because dialogue implies an implicit or explicit confession that one wants to learn from and with others, then Vivekananda did not come to dialogue. He came to 'make', 'teach' and 'reveal to', and each of these requires epistemic authority. Each of them forecloses both honest dialogue and intentional learning from and with others. Thus, although Swidler described the 1893 parliament and related gatherings and pronouncements as events that 'opened the dam for the dialogue among the religions of the world' and expanded the 'dialogic flood tide' (pp. 6–7), the authors think there was no dialogue in the first place. Because key speakers like Vivekananda spoke from the epistemic standpoint that they did, it is also thought that no dialogue

was even intended. His claim to have come for a dialogue is unsubstantiated.

In his presentation of the scope of focus of the first international conference by the Movement for Life and Work in 1925, Karlstroem (1954) explained that the movement would deal with social and international problems, rather than matters of faith and order. The reason for carving out this focus is that whereas the participants accepted that doctrines divided them, they also accepted that 'service unites' them (Karlstroem 1954:540). By limiting their focus to social matters – leaving out questions about faith – the organisers of that movement evaded central issues that *should* define interreligious dialogue. They respected the power spaces of each religious group. But this does not amount to interreligious dialogue. Religion-induced conflicts and global destructions do not result from disagreements on modes of rendering services but from absolutist disagreements about faith and order. It is therefore a façade to dodge questions about doctrine and belief in a gathering for interreligious dialogue. If the focus is on service, and dialogue has to do with learning from each other, it is not the leaders of religious groups who need to gather to learn about social service from each other. If such issues bother them a great deal, it will be more productive if they gather social workers and learn the same from them. But between doctrine and service, which is more important? To have chosen to focus on service implies that the convenors of the gathering were aware that service is more fundamental for human existence and survival than their points of doctrinal difference. While doctrinal differences cause much pain to adherents, unity in service trumps these differences because of its comparatively higher impact on concrete human lives. For this reason, the authors think that right from its conception and inception in 1925, interreligious dialogue as represented in Movement for Life and Work was a myth.

In 1928, leaders of other Christian churches (described as 'Protestants') invited the Catholic Church to be part of the newly emerging wave of intra-Christian dialogue. Pope Pius XI responded at the time that it was not allowed for Catholics to participate in conferences with non-Catholics. He explained:

[O]ne may foster the reunion of Christians only insofar as one fosters the return of those standing outside to the one true Church from which they once unfortunately separated themselves. (Pius XI:58)

This position was meant to retain a politics of space and power. Pope Pius XI's insistence on 'their' return to 'the one true Church' as a condition for fostering the reunion of Christians was a way of playing religious politics through defining the location of dialogue. Although at the time of making this declaration, the Catholic Church as an institution was not yet involved in interreligious dialogue, these are signs that the question about dialogue was a dagger that could not be tolerated.

It sounds exciting to report that one of the promises of interreligious dialogue is the idea of universal declaration of a global ethic (Swidler 2013:16). Some of the defining questions that have not been addressed by any such move at declaring a global ethic under the umbrella of interreligious dialogue are these: on which spiritual and epistemic authority would the principles of such an ethic be rooted? If the proponents of interreligious dialogue insist on respecting the political spaces created by their various doctrinal differences, would a universal ethic not require that they first sort out these differences? That is, for religionists to build a universal ethic, they would need to first sort out their fundamental doctrinal divisions. This is important because questions about epistemic and moral authorities from the angle of religionists are answered within beliefs and doctrines. Again, the authors argue that their initial decision to keep discussions on doctrinal divisions out of the focus of interreligious dialogue means that they never meant to engage in any dialogue in the first place. The reason for taking this position is closely related to Church and Samuelson's (2017:4) admission that 'whether it's Christian fundamentalism, Islamic jihadism, or militant atheism, religious dialogue remains tinted by a terrifying and dehumanizing arrogance of dogma, and ignorance'. This is a more defensible assessment of missionary religions than Heft's position that 'Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all affirm that God alone is absolute and that all affirmations about God and God's revelation are inescapably limited' (Heft 2011:4). Meanwhile, the authors submit that the best route to interreligious dialogue is the path of intellectual humility.

Intellectual humility as the condition for dialogues

In this section, the authors aim to demonstrate why: (1) intellectual humility is a necessary feature of and condition for dialogues; (2) missionary religions fundamentally lack this intellectual virtue; and (3) the secularist framework is the most secure ground for intercultural, interreligious and/or interideological dialogues.

The idea of intellectual virtue is at once old and new. It is old because as long as humans have interacted at individual and group levels, there has been the need to dialogue as equals without any prior claim to epistemic authority. It is, however, new and gaining more scholarly attention because fundamentalism has lingered into the 21st century despite all the evidence of individual, group and species-level ignorance or cognitive limitations. Hence, there is increasing research focus on intellectual humility as an example of intellectual virtue (Baehr 2011; Church & Samuelson 2017; Cornille 2013; Haggard et al. 2018; Roberts & Wood 2007; Zagzebski 1996).

The conception of intellectual humility that best captures its usage here is 'learned ignorance'. That concept is traced to Nicholas of Cusa, Augustine of Hippo and Socrates (Heft 2011:2). Based on Socrates' widely reported dictum that he knew nothing except that he did not know, and Aristotle's

idea that even in things humans think they know so well, they encounter many difficulties in knowing, Bond (ed. 1997:88–89) held that the human desire for knowledge should imply another ‘desire to know that we do not know’. He submitted that ‘nothing more perfect comes to a person ... the more one knows that one is ignorant’ (ed. Bond 1997:89). According to Heft, learned ignorance is deeper than intellectual humility with regard to discussions about God. At least within that context, learned ignorance is the result of careful reflection and acknowledgement of one’s inescapable intellectual limitations. Its advantage is that it ‘prevents all forms of fundamentalism, which assumes that believers are in perfect possession of ultimate reality’ (Heft 2011:4).

Heft’s distinction between intellectual humility and learned ignorance is not an issue of interest here. The authors limit themselves to the relevance of Nicholas of Cusa’s concept of learned ignorance. Heft interpreted Nicholas’s definition of learned ignorance to simply mean an acknowledgment by religious believers that what they ‘try to understand ... constantly transcends their ability to grasp fully and articulate adequately what they have experienced’ (Heft’s 2011:4). The authors rather retain Nicholas’s emphasis that learned ignorance involves a ‘desire to know that we do not know’. This is the heart of his idea of ‘learned ignorance’. It implies a continuous process of learning and relearning that one does not know. It is a prelude to and finds fulfilment in intellectual humility. What deserves to be emphasised about learned ignorance as an aspect of intellectual humility is that it answers the question of whether some persons are born humble (Church & Samuelson 2017:156–184). It also solves the hot debate on where to strike a balance between intellectual humility as owning one’s limitations and the need to retain yet-to-be refuted convictions without feeling arrogant (Church 2017; Haggard et al. 2018; Wang & Yang 2019; Whitcomb et al. 2015). The authors hold the position that no one is born intellectually arrogant, and even if one was born in a context in which they were socialised into being intellectually arrogant, they can always unlearn that trait, acknowledge their ignorance and then become intellectually humble. This is the mental framework, the intellectual virtue, that makes dialogue possible – that is, dialogue as an engagement in which knowing and learning agents willingly inquire together in openness to the possibility of learning from each other. When this virtue predominates, dialogue is more fruitful. Those involved will go into dialogue with openness to transform or be transformed and come out of it without resisting areas of invitation to transform. This virtue is a condition for any dialogue. The hope of positive transformation that it bears attends to Cornille’s (2013) fear of depriving dialogue of zeal and energy. This same hope of transformation is better than the eagerness to witness to what was previously known (Cornille 2013:23–24), like fossilised knowledge.

The eagerness by missionary religionists to witness to the tenets of their religious traditions and ‘make disciples of all nations’ implies that missionary religionists cannot ‘descend’ to the mental framework the authors described,

which precedes openness to engage in transformational experiences of humbly searching and learning with and from others. In concrete practice, missionary religionists cannot be intellectually humble. They cannot engage in what they termed interreligious dialogue. What they parade as interreligious dialogue is largely a myth. Absolutist religionists have one route out of their cage. It is the adoption of the secularist framework. By this the authors mean an assessment of beliefs, worldviews and ideologies as products of human construction rather than revelations from sacred or transcendent agents. Within this framework also, no belief, worldview or ideology is considered superior by default, in all respects, and to the point of imposing it on others. Each is as much an option as the others. To hold any view at any point does not connote an expectation to evangelise or witness to the view. The minimal, rational expectation from the holder of each view is to explain it to whoever questions, readily listen to alternative views and willingly modify their views when any view proves to represent reality better. They are not essentially defined by those views. Any identity they may derive from the view is only for the meantime.

This type of mental framework makes its holders eternal seekers of clearer information, knowledge and understanding. At each instance, they retain the desire to know that they do not know. They are thrilled rather than ashamed by every situation that proves they did not know what they thought they knew. They do not defend what they knew. They continuously join others to question what they knew so they can know better. In short, they are intellectually humble. Unfortunately, this is a rough path for missionary religionists. Yet this is the only path to productive interreligious dialogue. So long as they are unwilling to take this path, their claim to interreligious dialogue remains at most an extremely difficult project – at worst, a myth.

Conclusion

This study aimed to demonstrate that interreligious dialogue is a myth. Based on the study’s analyses, the authors conclude that intellectual humility is regulative. That is, it restricts the extent to which an intellectually humble agent can claim that their knowledge about *any* aspect of reality is indubitable, no matter the source of the knowledge. Because this element of indubitability grounds the epistemological pride of the religionist, the authors hold that a typical religionist cannot acquire the virtue of intellectual humility. The logic of missionary religion implies an initial epistemological certainty on the part of the missionary. For this reason, any consistent missionary religionist cannot be intellectually humble. Put in another way, the idea of intellectual humility contradicts the logic of missionary activities. The authors therefore hold that interreligious dialogue among missionary religionists is a myth. To insist that such a dialogue has been ongoing in the sense the authors defined interreligious dialogue would amount to self-deception among the

proponents of such a view. Such insistence reminds one of Wittgenstein's (1980:34e) submission that 'nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself'.

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Both authors contributed equally to the writing of this article.

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