

Women and the Conditions for Interreligious Dialogue

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In the debate over whether women have something distinctive to offer to interreligious dialogue, or whether women are particularly disposed to dialogue with other religions, this paper focuses on the conditions for the possibility of interreligious dialogue in relation to the place of women in their respective traditions. Dialogue is here understood in the radical comparative theological sense of the pursuit of religious development and growth through engagement with other religious traditions. Such dialogue presupposes humility about the truth of one's own tradition combined with commitment to that truth; belief in the relevance of the other religion for one's own religious reflection; integral understanding of the religious other; and affirmation of the other religion as a possible source of truth. Though none of these conditions suggest an essential difference between men and women, it is the historical experience of women within their respective traditions that might explain women's particular propensity or openness to interreligious dialogue. Awareness of the impact of religious patriarchy on the ritual structures and the doctrinal teachings of particular traditions may make women particularly aware of the fallible and finite nature of religious doctrines and thus prone to doctrinal humility. The history of religious patriarchy has also served as a point of interconnection among women from different religious traditions. And in finding in other traditions possible elements of inspiration for feminist critique and development, women have or may also develop more general openness toward the truth of other religions. Though integral interreligious understanding, which includes not only factual or rational understanding but also experiential resonance with the religious other is not a prerogative of women, their particular narrative style of engaging in dialogue might allow for greater religious empathy.

The one condition that might present a greater challenge for women engaged in interreligious dialogue is that of commitment. This involves a willingness and ability to speak in name of a particular tradition, and to contribute to its further development and growth. Women's experience may be seen to magnify the tension between openness and commitment that is part of all interreligious dialogue. Even apart of the question of whether women can speak and be part of the official religious discourses within their respective traditions, their critical attitude toward all normative discourses may remove women's desire to continue to commit to the religious or theological advancement of their particular religions. Women involved in interreligious dialogue often appropriate a pluralist attitude toward religious truth. Whether or not this may accord with the self-understanding of religious traditions remains to be seen.