

From Irony to Inclusion

early models for interfaith dialogue

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Flags: photo, Cetta Kenney

INTRODUCTION

Every indigenous faith develops a set of perceptions to separate believers from un/believers. We may describe these as “buffer beliefs”. They include: assuming the faithful of other religions as inferior, and thus unworthy of the Truth; ignorant, and thus deprived of the Truth; conceited, and thus resistant to the Truth; or vicious, and thus impervious to the truth. These perceptions, in their turn, warrant ignoring, converting, debating, or despising other believers. Therefore theologies and apologies arise to buttress the “buffer beliefs”. When believers experience a weakening of these beliefs disillusionment and defection ensue, followed by further diehard attempts to fortify the ramparts. The resulting condition limits communication between religions to territorial or polemical turf battles whose fallout rains on all sides, fostering suspicion of others and doubt of one’s own spiritual heritage.

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To escape such a predicament, world religions have long sought alternative approaches to interfaith encounters. Mystical traditions of non-Western societies notwithstanding, Christian theology seems to have been the first to examine seriously the possibility of exploring the beliefs of the adherents of other religions without the intent to convert or to repudiate them. Two early modern theological developments paved the way to the current interfaith dialogue: Friedrich Schleiermacher’s statement that God is available, to some degree, in all religions, but that Christianity is nevertheless superior to all has led to what is today known as “Inclusivism”. Ernst Troeltch’s view that every culture’s claim can only be viewed

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as its peculiar apprehension of the divine and William James' emphasis on the centrality of individual experience in diverse religious milieus has ushered in the current schools of thought that advocate "Pluralism". As such, the twentieth century's unprecedented tolerance of spiritual diversity in the name of interfaith dialogue marks a distinct triumph of intellectual curiosity and spiritual empathy over the naive or learned quest of isolation.

This essay will explore simpler paradigms that anticipate the contemporary models of interfaith dialogue. They are expressed in parables and fictional narratives of pre-modern or early modern cultures. I shall explore Saadi's "Ironic Detachment", Cooper's "Pragmatist Acceptance", Rumi's "Ordained Diversity", and Tolstoy's "Perspectivist Tolerance".

Of the four approaches presented here two are Eastern and decidedly pre-modern. The other two belong to the Western and early modern era. There is, I will argue, a correspondence between the Eastern and Western approaches. Saadi and Cooper propose a practical, common-sense approach; while Rumi and Tolstoy seek a deeper spiritual solution. Therefore, instead of a conventional grouping of the two 13th century Eastern poet-philosophers and the two 19th century Western novelists together, I have interspersed them based on the affinity of their respective views.¹ Needless to say, this typology is meant to be neither exhaustive of types of early interfaith dialogue, nor of the instances belonging to each type.

I. SAADI'S IRONIC DETACHMENT

Saadi (1213-1291 CE)², an Iranian Sage of the 13th century, a practicing Muslim, a judge, and an advisor to the kings was a seasoned world traveler who composed many works of poetry and prose, crowned by two major compilations: *Golestan* (the *Rose Garden*) and *Bustan* (*The Orchard*). With respect to interfaith dialogue, Saadi adopts a posture that I would like to call "ironic detachment", deriding the futility and narrow-mindedness of religious quarrels. Saadi's position does not offer a way out of the impasse of the self-righteous contest of the believers, but by exposing the folly of dogmatic defiance, points to an alternative path toward interfaith dialogue.³ In *Golestan*, which is a seamless juxtaposition of witticisms, maxims, and admonitions set both in verse and ornamental prose, we come across a parable (*Hekayat*) that bears the following title: "Everyone fancies himself the most knowledgeable and his children the most adorable." The story is set in couplets:

*A Jew and a Muslim started
to bicker,*

*In such manner as to make
me snicker:*

*The Muslim said if I am wrong
may God turn me into a Jew!*

*The Jew said I swear by Torah,
if I lie, may I be turned into
a Muslim like You!*

*If Reason disappears from the land,
None will suspect themselves
ignorant!*⁴

Saadi's mystical counterpart, Hafez (1325-1389) who despised hypocritical and superficial fanaticism in faith, describes the endless intra-religious contests in similar terms, as a false and futile exercise:

*Pardon the battle of the seventy
two denominations,
As they missed the truth they
took the path of illusions.⁵*

This approach seems to suggest that in religious bickering both sides are equally misguided, indeed, ludicrous. Hence the authors seem to admonish against direct and accusatory engagement with one's religious counterparts. These sages, while incontrovertibly anchored within their own religious

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The Game; original art, Katherine Ace

beliefs and practices, expose the absurdity of deeming other beliefs and practices false. Such refusal to engage in rhetorical and partisan debate paves the way for a genuine interfaith dialogue.

Three centuries after Saadi, Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), the renowned French Renaissance thinker, voiced a similar opinion about the capricious nature of traditional beliefs and practices: In view of such arbitrariness, he advocated religious tolerance.⁶ This skeptical view of custom found such advocates as Descartes and Pascal in the succeeding generations of French thinkers. In the subsequent centuries other European authors and philosophers employed variations on the theme of ironic detachment to underscore the human virtues of the infidels or, alternatively, the human failings of the Western observers. Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1623), and Charles

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Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721) invoked fictional societies or exotic outsiders to articulate their critique of the absurdities of the European cultural and religious practices. Voltaire argued that it was folly, not wisdom, that was shared by all nations.⁷ Ironic detachment is at work even when one professes one's faith. Thomas Hardy's Jude in *Jude the Obscure*, trying to explain his choice of Christianity to his cousin Sue, simply states: "Well dear, I suppose one must take some things on trust. Life isn't long enough to work out everything in Euclid

problems before you believe in it. I take Christianity." Sue responds: "Well, perhaps you can take something worse."

II. JAMES FENIMORE COOPER'S PRAGMATIC ACCEPTANCE

James Fenimore Cooper, the early American novelist (1789-1851), to whose legacy such great authors as Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, D. H. Lawrence and Georg Lukacs have paid homage, and who still inspires Hollywood films based on his portrayals of pastoral America, indicates a second path of interfaith understanding. Natty Bumppo (Hawk-eye) and Chingachgook (Indian



Friendship: photo, Cetta Kenney

John), heroes of his *Leatherstocking Tales*, are the marginalized denizens of the no-man's land between cultures. Both are "inner directed"⁸ strong men, imbued with their respective pioneer European and East coast Native American cultures. But for reasons of their own, they have strayed from the mainstream of their culture to lead lives of fierce independence and deep solitude away from their natal environments. We meet them in five novels written between 1826 and 1849¹⁰ as they share numerous adventures and grow old together. They have come to

respect and trust each other to such an extent that they could not sustain deep prejudices of their native cultures about each other. How could either one of them sincerely believe that the other, despite all his compassion, courage, and honesty will be condemned to eternal torture and damnation due to his “false” religion?¹¹ So, Natty, a usually taciturn and reticent character, utters an ecumenical hope about religious salvation that circumvents the doctrinal irreconcilability of the religions and embraces the fellowship of men of conscience and good will. In the following passage, Natty Bumpo bids farewell to Uncas, Indian John’s son:

*I loved both you and your father Uncas, though our skins are not altogether of a color, and our gifts are somewhat different. Tell the Sagamore I never lost sight of him in my greatest trouble; and, as for you, think of me sometimes when on a lucky trail; and depend on it, boy, whether there be one heaven or two, there is a path in the other world by which honest men may come together again.*¹²

Thus Natty, whom James Fenimore Cooper has characterized as the “American Adam”¹³, articulates an authentic maxim of the early American immigrant experience: pragmatic acceptance of all despite the apparent incommensurability of beliefs.

Lest Cooper’s approach is dismissed as an isolated and romantic glance at the encounter of European and Native American cultures, let’s recall that Charles Henry Dana, who published

his classic *Two Years before the Mast* at the same time, found the same attributes among the Hawaiian Kanaka that Cooper had ascribed to East Coast Indians. Indeed, there is a curious parallel between the accounts of Dana’s real life friendship with Hope, the Sandwich Islander and the imagined friendship of Natty and Chigachgook. Only after four months of association with the Kanakas Dana would proclaim:

I would have trusted my life and my fortune in the hands of any one of these people; and certainly had I wished for a favor or act of sacrifice, I would have gone to them all, in turn, before I should have applied to one of my own countryman (p. 144-5).

Of his best friend Hope he said affectionately:

I really felt a strong affection for him, and preferred him to any of my own countrymen there; and I believe there was nothing which he would not have done for me (p. 243).

It is with deep pathos, then, that Dana, himself a practicing Christian, recounts, in words reminiscent of Cooper’s Natty Bumpo, the tragedy of Sandwich Islanders:

They seem a doomed people. The curse of a people calling themselves Christian seems to follow them everywhere; and even there, in this obscure place [California of 1835 was a remote Mexican province] lay two young islanders, whom I had left strong, active young men,

in the vigor of health, wasting away under a disease, which they would never have known but for their intercourse with Christianized Mexico and people from Christian America (p. 242).

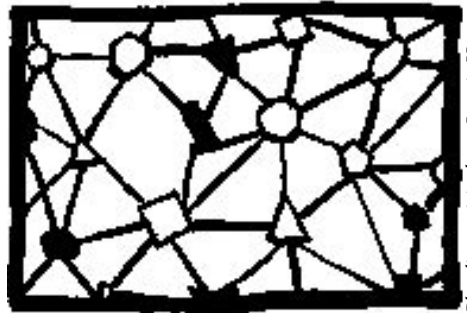
The curious consonance of Cooper's novels and Dana's memoirs corroborates the authenticity of the American emerging attitude toward intercultural and interfaith dialogue. Of course, seen from a strict logical vantage point, this approach offers no theoretical solution for the apparent mutual exclusion of faiths sanctioned by the dogma of traditional religions, but it is intuitively appealing and pragmatically viable.

III. LEO TOLSTOY'S PERSPECTIVIST TOLERANCE

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) proposes an insightful theory of interfaith understanding in one of the closing chapters of *Anna Karenina*. It comes as an epiphany to Constantin Levin. There is little doubt that the latter represents Tolstoy himself. Not only is he from the same social class and has the same concerns with land-ownership, agricultural science, theology, and education of peasants as Tolstoy, he reads the same books and even engages in the same idiosyncratic behavior as his creator.¹⁴ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Levin's religious epiphany that occurred after a long period of blind faith, grave doubts, dogged agnosticism, and even spells of atheism, was one that Leo Tolstoy himself had experienced, as he described it in his *My Confession* and other religious writings.

The event is characterized as a sudden illumination, although Levin felt he had

always been implicitly aware of it. One of the most important attributes of this revelation is the way in which Levin comes to reconcile the absolute universality of faith with the historical particularity of the religion (Christian church.). Further, he finds a way of acknowledging the truth claims of other religions while holding on to his own faith. Indeed it is the question of the validity of other faiths that sets him on the path to a reverie of discovery: "What is the relationship to it [Christian faith] of the beliefs of the Buddhists and Muslims who also teach and do good?"¹⁵



Pluralism; original art, Lonnie Hanson

Levin contemplates this enigma, sitting in his dusky room and gazing at the momentary flashes of a receding storm that obscure the majesty of the dark empty sky with its eternal constellations, the Milky Way, prominently streaking it. Suddenly a beguiling analogy occurs to him: just as the astronomers use the illusion of the stability of the earth to chart the movement of heavenly bodies, knowing, all along, that the earth is the moving object, so the believers can reconcile themselves to the illusion of the centrality and solidity of their beliefs against the apparent flux of distant faiths. The truths are relative compared

to each other, yet they are all parts of a universal and eternal constellation of realities beyond the reach and spiritual needs of the particular believer.

Thus a model of interfaith dialogue is proposed that sacrifices neither the universality of the truth, nor the particularity of beliefs and rituals that aim to capture and consecrate it within specific cultural traditions.

IV. RUMI'S DECREED

DIVERSITY

Rumi (1207-1273 CE), who is one of the most celebrated Islamic mystics, (also known by such titles as Sufis and Arifs) proposes the boldest pre-modern model of religious diversity and dialogue. He believes that the diversity of faith is a result of human limited horizons and illusions. However, God

God understands and embraces this diversity, regardless of which faith recognizes and praises God best.

understands and embraces this diversity, regardless of which faith recognizes and praises God best. Rumi has proposed this idea in a number of places in his *Mathnavi* and *Divan e Shams*. But perhaps the most readily accessible and detailed treatment of the subject appears in a parable, obviously an apocryphal one, of an encounter between Moses and an illiterate shepherd. As Moses approaches the shepherd's hut he overhears him feverishly and lovingly praying to God, imploring him to come out of hiding, so he can feed him with

the milk of his best sheep, comb his hair, fix his bed, massage his feet, and mend his shoes. Moses is furious at what he perceives as unmitigated blasphemy:

*Moses said: Hey! you have
rebuffed the creed
Not a believer yet, a
disbeliever indeed!*

*Your blasphemy reeks to
high heaven,
Your sacrilege corrupts
the fabric religion.
If you do not stop this
abomination,
A fireball will descend
and scorch the nation.*

Moses' sharp rebuke plunges the illiterate shepherd into agonizing despair:

*"O Moses you have sown up my
lips," he said,
"you have set my soul ablaze
with regret,"*

He wanders off chastened and utterly vanquished by Moses' unrelenting verdict. But the story does not end here:

*Then a revelation came
to Moses, Thus:
You have separated our
servant from us!
You have been sent to join together,
Not to tear asunder, to sever.
We do not regard the exterior
and what is said,
We look inside, at the
sentiment instead.*

*Hindus worship in the
 idiom of Hind,
 Sindis worship in the
 idiom of Sind.
 I have given everyone
 a singular subjectivity,
 I have endowed every
 idiom a unique identity.
 If he says the wrong thing,
 do not call him a transgressor,
 Do not baptize martyr's
 blood-soaked body in water.
 Blood is purer, for martyrs,
 than water,
 This impurity is, for them,
 a hundred times better...
 Abandon verbiage, subtlety,
 and metaphoric fashion,
 I want passion, Passion's what
 I want, yearn for passion...
 No sooner Moses this
 divine rebuke heard,
 Than he ran in the desert
 after the shepherd.
 At last he spotted him,
 stopped him and said:
 "Good tidings: I was given
 a new mandate"...
 Seek no affectations,
 no arrangement
 Speak to your lonely
 heart's content.
 Your blasphemy is faith itself,
 your religion, light of the life
 You are safe and from you,
 an entire world is safe.*

But ironically, the shepherd is not able to recapture his naiveté. Moses' rebuke has elevated his spirit to new heights:

*He said O Moses all that
 is now behind me,
 Awash in my heart's
 blood, you find me.
 You spurred my steed,
 and he jumped high,
 He has cleared, in one
 leap, the dome of the sky.¹⁸*

The theme of the unimportance of apparent religious differences against the backdrop of the ultimate unity of spiritual paths is central to Islamic mysticism. Farid ud Din Attar (1142-1220), one of Rumi's sources of inspiration, allegorically conveyed it in his fable of the birds.

CONCLUSION

Mosleh al-Din Saadi and James Fenimore Cooper's practical and common sense solutions – to abandon religious finger-pointing and hostile polemics and to trust one's intuition that people of sincere intentions and virtuous deeds cannot be doomed due to the particular ways of their worship; and Leo Tolstoy and Jalal al Din Rumi's ambitious projects of reconciling the universality of religious truth with the particular forms of belief and practice, remain fresh and instructive, despite the centuries separating them from each other and from us.

Although I have, hitherto, deliberately avoided comparing these early pioneers of interfaith dialogue with their modern counterparts, it would be instructive to consider how they would relate to contemporary theological debates concerning interfaith dialogue. In my opinion, Saadi and Cooper advocated variations

The affinity of the four premonitions of interfaith dialogue with modern categories of Pluralism and Inclusivism

	Weak	Strong
Pluralism	<i>Saadi's Ironic Detachment</i>	<i>Cooper's Pragmatic Acceptance</i>
Inclusivism	<i>Tolstoy's Perspectivist Tolerance</i>	<i>Rumi's Decreed Diversity</i>

on the theme of “Pluralism”, while Rumi and Tolstoy may be characterized as proponents of “Inclusivism”. It may further elucidate their positions if we distinguish them by their respective levels of strength. The table on this page summarizes the above:

One common denominator between the precursors of interfaith dialogue and their contemporary counterparts is their common intercultural experiences. All four of the authors we have discussed here were products of liminal or transcultural circumstances, where one gains a novel perspective on one’s native culture and indigenous beliefs. Saadi was an avid world traveler. Rumi had converted from a legalistic and ritualistic belief to a mystical and spiritual faith and, in his spiritual quest, had wandered far away from home. Cooper was at the epicenter of the immigrant experience in New York and witnessed not only the amalgamation of multi-ethnic settler communities but the assimilation and gradual evanescence of the Native American cultures in the American frontier. And Tolstoy, the cosmopolitan aristocrat, stood at the threshold of the historic transformation of Russia from an isolated Feudal country into a complex modern society.

All four theories bear witness that interfaith dialogue has been with us in spirit, if not in letter, throughout the second millennium.

POSTSCRIPT

One night while parking in front of “Brickhaus”, my favorite coffee shop, I noticed the bumper sticker on the car parked in front of me. It read:

“God Is Too Big to Fit into a Single Religion”

This invitation to ecumenism, humorous as it looked in those bold dancing fonts, reminded me of the long odyssey of the ideas of tolerance, inclusivism, pluralism, and interfaith understanding; and of how far we have come on the path of recognizing both the utter universality and the unique singularity of our spiritual experiences.

POST-POSTSCRIPT

And then, September 11 rolled in. The note of optimism in my post-script is now crusted over with a patina of doubt. The shadow of the “clash of civilizations” blots out the penumbra of hope in the aftermath of the carnage. And it is no longer only the lunatic fringe that dares claim a monop-

oly of inclusive human values. Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian prime minister in the wake of the tragedy pontificated thus: “We must be aware of the superiority of our civilization, a system that has guaranteed well-being and respect for human rights – in contrast with Islamic countries” (*Newsweek*, October 8, 2001). May be the main argument of this paper – the universality of the quest for interfaith understanding – would be received with a new sense of urgency in view of the darkening horizons of intercultural understanding.

NOTES

¹For reasons of space, I have had to forego describing how the authors in this essay are otherwise connected to each other due to the common attributes of their work. For example, Georg Lukacs, the Hungarian social theorist and literary critic has argued that Tolstoy and Cooper both represent the genre of “Historical Novel” pioneered by Sir Walter Scott. Their depiction of the past, while fictional in particular details, render an authentic account of the historical era they describe.

²The *Encyclopedia Britannica* offers a succinct account of his life.

³It is worth noting that Saadi’s larger insight into the essential unity of mankind, set in a famous couplet, adorns one of the halls of the United Nations:

*The humankind are the limbs of one frame,
As in creation their origin is the same.
If fate causes one of the limb to sting,
Others too will cry in suffering.*

⁴Sheikh Mosleh al Din Sa’di of Shiraz, *Golestan (Rose Garden)* The Book of “Adab e Sohbat” (*The Manners of Companionship*),

1985. Eghbal Publications, Tehran.

⁵Mohammad Shams al Din Hafez of Shiraz, *Divan e Ghazalliat (Compendium of poetry)*, Ghazal (sonnet) 184. The number 72 in this poem is a reference to a saying attributed to the Prophet of Islam in which he prophesied as many as seventy two eventual sectarian interpretations of Islam.

⁶Religion, Montaigne argued, is “beyond the reach of human reason.” Therefore, “any error is more excusable in such as are not endowed, through the divine bounty, with an extraordinary illumination from above.” It is conceivable that the ravages of the infamous thirty year “Wars of Religion” (562-1598) influenced Montaigne’s advocacy of indulgence for those with “besotted” understanding of religion.

⁷The above examples notwithstanding, cognitive generosity toward other cultures remained sporadic throughout these centuries. Cross cultural empathy was reserved only for those who submitted to religious conversion and cultural assimilation; a fate illustrated in the transformation of “Friday” from a savage to a Christian in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. In absence of such a conversion, even the admittedly virtuous unbelievers are relegated to eternal damnation. We find them confined in Dante’s *Inferno* for no greater offense than being born before Christ. Of particular poignancy is the fate of Mohammad and Ali, the prophet of Islam and his successor, who are depicted eternally slit “by one great stroke upward from chin to crest.” The reason:

*“All these whom thou beholdest in the pit,
Were Sowers of scandal, sowers of schism abroad,
While they yet lived; therefore they now go
slit.”* (canto XXVIII, 28-36)

⁸Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, p. 135. Hardy’s agnostic approach and his hostility

toward organized religion is evident in his other works and has been the subject of extended commentary.

⁹Here I am using the dichotomy of attitudes: Inner directed/Other directed from the classical publication of the Sociologist David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd* to describe Cooper's protagonists.

¹⁰*The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *Prairie* (1827), *Pioneers* (1831), *Pathfinder* (1840), *Deerslayer* (1841).

¹¹Actually, Chingachgook, had converted to Christianity, but Cooper elucidates, in great amusing detail, how little the new faith had impacted his spiritual approach toward the world, and how deeply and totally steeped in his Native American beliefs he had been all along.

¹²James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 1826, 1980, New York, Signet Classics, p. 373.

¹³James Fenimore Cooper, *Pathfinder*, 1840.

¹⁴For example, Levin lends his diaries, detailing his reckless youthful exploits to his fiancée, Kitty, as a way to atone for his sins and to be honest with his wife. Tolstoy did the same thing with his prospective wife Sonia. Similarly, in a period of despair, Levin keeps a rope nearby in case he decides to end his life. Tolstoy reports the same about his own life.

¹⁵*My Confession*, pp. 684-5. F. A Flowers III, in his preface to Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief* states that Tolstoy undertook an in-depth study of Buddhism, Islam and Christianity" (p. 9) in his search for true spirituality.

¹⁶*Encyclopedia Britannica* for a brief biographical sketch of Rumi's life.

¹⁷This allegory refers to the Islamic practice of washing the body of the deceased with

water in a prescribed ritual manner. Every trace of blood (considered impure in the Islamic tradition) must be scrupulously removed. However, the body of the martyrs are absolved from this requirement. Therefore, an agent of contamination, blood, is rendered pure.

¹⁸Rumi, *Mathnawi*, Book II, verses 1727, 1729, 1731, 1748, 1736, 1750-51, 1759, 1757, 1753, 1766-67, 1762, 1777, 1783, 1784-86, 1787-90, 1791.

¹⁹Among the contemporaries, the wanderings of Thomas Merton are legendary. John Hick attributes his conversion, from an exclusivist evangelical Christian into a pluralist advocate of a religious "Copernican Revolution", to his association with members of Islamic, Buddhist, Sikh, and Hindu communities in Birmingham. In their homes and places of worship he realized "something that is obvious enough once noticed", that is: "different faith communities see and respond to different 'faces' of the infinite transcendent Reality." (Okholm, Dennis and Phillips, Timothy (eds.), *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. 1995. Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids. pp. 13, 38, 91). Such an intercultural empathetic intuition that is rather frequent for the citizens of our global community was available, only on rare occasions, for our predecessors.