

The Role of Story Telling in Interreligious Dialogue

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I want to discuss with you some of the concerns we all face as we attempt to educate the next generation into our faith traditions, since these concerns are common to all faith communities in multicultural, multireligious—and often a-religious—societies.

We know that many of the younger generation are not very impressed by the face of religion (be it Christianity or Islam) shown to them in our time. At the very least, there is need for greater and deeper information. Some years ago, speaking to an audience of students about the relationship between Jews, Christians and Muslims, I referred to the different sons of Abraham, and a student raised her hand to ask, “Who is Abraham?” A Belgian writer has told of the time when, driving with her daughter past a church where a crucifix hung, the daughter asked her, “Who is hanging there, Mom?” We may in fact need a kind of “deconstruction” of mutual ignorance or false information about religious traditions as a starting point. But I would like to focus on one feature of religious life which I believe holds great promise for inter-cultural and interreligious understanding.

story telling in general: why tell stories?

After all, the different religious communities are communities in which stories are told. The plot of a story links the cultural horizon of the teller with the hearers. It invites participation in the fundamental discussion about your own life. The plot of a story lets the listener work with the sentiments it recites, and connects the listeners with the progress of the story, perhaps the great story told in connection with a larger story of the community itself.

Telling stories builds up a community. Building stones for the continuation of the story-telling community in new situations, new cultures, new times. Each story communicates the norms and values which the story teller finds of significance for the continuation of the community which he hopes for his children. Each story recreates the community again by referring to the fundamental truths of the community through suitable feelings and responses.

How do we learn from stories? I would list these five things that stories teach: that life is full of contradictions; that surprise is to be found in common things; that inner life can always be richer; that something new lies ahead, and that possibility is greater than we expect. Beyond these, stories contribute to the maintaining and testing and improvement of the democratic community wherein we live. And finally, telling and hearing stories counterbalances social isolation and disintegration. Fostering sensitivity to a world of symbols, stories give us capacity to sensitively probe into new areas of reality and thus can make people also more sensitive for the symbols of people of different cultures and traditions.

All religious traditions have examples of great figures who contributed their stories in response to the challenges of their time. After the fall of Rome, the question arose: “Is this the end of civilization and the conquest of barbarism?” In response, St. Augustine wrote *De Civitate Dei* (*On the City of God*). In the Muslim tradition, recall the example the mystic, Jalal al-Din al-Rumi or Mawlana, “our master” as the Muslims call him. He wrote his collection of very inspiring stories, *Mathnawi*, after the fall of one of the great cultural centers of the world, Baghdad, in 1258.

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Or we might mention a recent example of Seamus Heaney, who writes of a new Ireland beyond the “troubles.” His story gives courage and hope to an embattled people.

Perhaps we have to tell stories in a more modest way than it often happened in the past. And since they are often not even limited to a particular culture or religion, are widely understandable and communicable and translatable or actually are in a way already translated, stories can help us to learn to live in a multicultural society. Because the elements of story can illuminate the key ideas in a tradition, they help us to understand a different religion more readily than does a comparative study of specific pronouncements or dogmas.

Now what I intend to do is to reflect with you in more depth on one particular story taken from the Qur’an which is elaborated later on in the Muslim mystical tradition, so rich in story telling. I would like to give one example of such a story, found in chapter (*Sura*) 18 of the Qur’an, the story of Moses and his servant meeting with a stranger. What is so interesting and important about this story?

where does it come from?

Let me make clear at the outset that when I ask about the sources of this story, I am not intending to say that this particular Qur’anic story is not original or that Mohammed is committing plagiarism. Throughout history people are always telling and retelling stories and in so doing influencing each other and being influenced by the other all the time. One might take as an example the sufi story about Jesus: One day Jesus is walking with his disciples and comes across a dead dog. The disciples said: “Oh! he is stinking!” Whereupon Jesus said: “Look how beautiful his teeth are.” This story is, for instance, also told about the Buddha!

To further describe some instances of re-use and borrowing of story materials, let me refer to two that are well-known to Western literature, Cervantes and James Joyce. The famous author of *Don Quixote* lived in a turbulent time like ours. Wounded in 1571 in the sea-battle of Lepanto as the Spanish-Venetian Papal fleet engaged the Ottoman Turks, who had hoped to destroy Christian power, Cervantes became known in Spain as *el manco de Lepanto*: the one-handed one of Lepanto. He was not a “new Christian,” as it was called, i.e. he was a convert from Judaism! The book of “the knight-errant with the sad face,” fighting against windmills, is often read superficially. But a careful reading of the novel reveals the mainspring of the book’s extraordinary power. It is the first instance in popular literature of the profoundly religious theme of victory plucked from defeat, which has strong Christian implications. The Don, courteous and chivalrous toward those who ill use him, and ready to help the distressed and attack tyranny or cruelty at whatever cost to himself, is manifestly a greater man than the dull-witted peasants and cruel nobles who torment and despise him. We love him, because his folly is Christ-like, his victory is not of this world.

What is my point here? Cervantes claimed that his novel which was supposed to end all knight tales, his *Don Quixote*, is not just a knightly story but a tale copied from an Arab historian! In Cervantes’ time Arabic was still spoken in Spain, for only in 1614 were the last Moriscos driven out of Spain. Therefore it could have sounded credible for his contemporaries that the original *Don Quixote* was the work of a Moor, a historiographer called Sidi Hamet ben Engeli, and was originally written in Arabic. Though this assertion is not literally true, Cervantes certainly owes much to Andalusian culture. Actually Cervantes defended the ideals of the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam in a time when the ideals of a multi-cultural society (the famous symbiosis in Spain) were coming to an end.

Another example from the beginning of our century is the Irish writer James Joyce. He is not committing plagiarism when he in his *Ulysses* follows the structure of the Homer’s *Odyssey*. Rather, setting the tale of the wandering man during one day and in one place, he both particularizes and universalizes the original story. Leopold Bloom—the Ulysses of the Book—is a wandering Dublin Jew, while Stephen Dedalus—the Telemachus of the book—is the Dublin poet, a Telemachus in search for the wandering father. Joyce implies that life and time are continuous and the heroic wanderings of Ulysses are re-enacted in the unheroic wanderings of men upon the face of the earth in

our times, that life is made up of recurring cycles, that birth, life and death are surrounded by legends that grow out of the life-and death process, past and present as well as future, and that these cycles occur in the vastness of eternity. So I hope these two examples indicate my contention that the use of prior materials does not diminish the significance of the later work, but quite the contrary.

the story of the Khidr, the Green Man

In the 18th chapter of the Qur'an, called "the cave"(verses 59-81), one finds the story about the meeting of Moses with a stranger. The outline is as follows:

Moses (or Musa) goes with his servant on a journey, the goal of which is the meeting of the two seas. But when they reach this spot, they find that the fish which they had brought with them for a meal has found its way into the water and swum away! While looking for the fish, the two travellers meet a servant of God. Moses wants to follow this unnamed stranger to see if he will teach him the right path. They come to an arrangement but the servant of God tells him at the outset that though Moses will not understand what he will be doing, he must not ask for explanations.

They set out on the journey during which the servant of God does a number of outrageous things. First the stranger drills a hole in the boat of some poor fishermen, so that they cannot go out to fetch their daily catch. Then he comes to a place where he and Moses are graciously invited into some people's house, but the next morning he kills their young son. Third, he comes to a place where people are rude to both of them, but yet he helps them build a wall. Moses loses patience so that he cannot refrain from asking for an explanation, whereupon the servant of God replies: Did I not tell you that you would be lacking in patience with me? At all three points Moses cannot contain himself; he protests and demands an explanation. But this is contrary to the deal which he has made with the stranger. The stranger finally leaves Musa and on departing gives him the explanation of his actions, for each of which he has some good (?) reasons.

Now when we ask about the origins of this story, we will get some fruitful answers. The Qur'anic story may be traced back to three main sources: the Gilgamesh epic, the Alexander romance, and the Jewish legend of Elijah and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi. Let us take each of these and look for the similarities.

Overcome with melancholy at the death of his friend Engidu, Gilgamesh, the great hero of ancient Mesopotamia, discovers that every living thing must die. In order to learn from him the secret of immortality, Gilgamesh resolves to seek out the wise old man of his time: Ut-napishtim, who has been given eternal life and who lives at the mouth of the rivers on an island across the sea of Death. Gilgamesh wants to ask him about the plant of life which will rescue man from the power of death. Gilgamesh passed alone and at the shore of the sea where a mysterious female received him with the following lines:

*O Gilgamesh, whither do you fare?
The life you seek, you will not find.
When the gods created man,
They apportioned death to mankind;
And retained life to themselves.*

*O, Gilgamesh, fill your belly,
Make merry, day and night;
Make each day a festival of joy,
Dance and play, day and night!
Let your raiment be kept clean,
Your head washed, body bathed.
Pay heed to the little one, holding onto your hand,
Let your wife delight your heart.
For in this is the portion of man.*

Gilgamesh insisted on his quest; and the woman sent him on to the ferryman of death, who would bring him across the cosmic sea to the island of the blessed, where the ever-living Ut-napishtim dwelt, together with his wife. The ageless couple received the voyager, let him sleep for

six days and nights, fed him magic food, washed him with healing waters and told of the plant of immortality at the bottom of the cosmic sea, which he must pluck if he would live, as he desired, forever. And so, once again, in the boat of the ferryman of death, Gilgamesh voyaged as no one ever before him. "The plant is like a buckthorn," Ut-napishtim told him, "Its thorns will tear your hands, but if your hands can pluck it, you gain new life." Gilgamesh is able to do so. But when he had landed and was on his way, he paused for the night; and when he went to bathe, a serpent, sniffing the fragrance of the plant, came out of the water, took the plant, returned to its abode, consuming it, shedding its skin. Whereat Gilgamesh sat down and wept. That is why the plant, the power of immortal life, which formerly was known as a property of man, was taken away and now remains in the keep of the cursed serpent. Thus the servant of God at the place where the two seas meet reminds one of the Gilgamesh epic's figure of the old man. In the Qur'an he is called the "one whom God granted his mercy and to whom he gave divine wisdom," which is sometimes interpreted as a translation of his name. The granting of the divine favour is perhaps an echo of Utnapishtim's immortality.

Next, in the romance or novel of Alexander the Great, a story is told of the hero accompanied by his cook Andreas, whom Muslims call Idris. (The prophet Mohammed met Idris during his nightly journey and ascension). Alexander and his cook are in search for the source of life. After a long time they decided to go separate ways in order to have more chance of finding the source of life. By chance Andreas passed by a river. At a given moment during this travels, Andreas opened the bag containing his fish and washed the salted fish which he had brought with him. The contact with the water made the fish alive again. The fish swam away. Andreas jumped in after the fish and in so doing gained immortality. When he met Alexander again and told him of his adventures, the hero at once realized that this was the well of life. They both set out to find the source again. But all attempts to find it again fail. Alexander missed the blessed fountain and failed to reach immortality. (For the Arab tradition Iskandar-Dhu 'l Qarnayn already combines the characteristics of the warlike hero with those of the prophet of universality). The learned Iranian poet, Nizâmî (ca. 1141- ca. 1217) locates the story principally in Iran. He makes him the image of the Iranian knight— peace-loving and moderate, courteous and always ready for any noble action. He demonstrates his eclecticism in the information he gives. He says: "I have taken from everything just what suited me and I have borrowed from recent histories, Christian, Pahlevî and Jewish. . .and of them I have made a whole."

The third source for the Qur'anic story is a rabbinic, Jewish legend. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi goes on a trip under conditions laid down by Elijah, much like those we have heard of in the Qur'an story. He is accompanied by Elijah, who does a number of terrible things which have the same effect on the rabbi as the actions of the stranger have on Moses in the Qur'anic story. Thus we have several of the same elements: Moses reminds one of the role of Gilgamesh as well as Alexander in the novel, and of Joshua ben Levi in the rabbinic legend; the servant of Moses is reminiscent of Andreas the cook of Alexander. The episode of the fish one finds only in the novel; then there is this anonymous person, "the servant of our servants," who reminds one of the prophetic figure of the rabbinic stories, namely Elijah. The test of patience to which the stranger subjects Moses comes from the Jewish legend only. After having said something about the background of this Qur'anic story, I want to continue by saying more about the way the story has developed in the Muslim mystical tradition.

mystical elaboration of the Khidr story

Many details missing in the Qur'an were added by later Muslim commentators. The unknown man receives a name in the commentators' tradition. He is Khidr or Khadir: the Green man. Green is always connected with paradise and positive, spiritual things. Angels and saints wear green cloths, for example, and Muslims in Egypt place green around gravestones foreshadowing paradise. Green is also the colour of the prophet Muhammad; his descendants wear green turbans. Arab Christians, by the way, see in Khidr a version of Saint George. By the Sufis he is called "the master of the path

of wisdom." Around this green man arose many legends and stories. He is a mythological figure, a archetype more than a concrete person, which gives his appearance here a certain message. Moses, the great prophet and law-giver of the Children of Israel—like Gilgamesh before him—sets out to search for the source of Divine knowledge. He looks for a certain mysterious, unnamed figure. The unnamed "green man" (Khadir or Khidr) is as God says, "one of Our servants to whom We granted mercy and whom we taught in Our knowledge." The knowledge and wisdom he possesses, therefore, are superior to the knowledge and wisdom given to Moses. He lives on a green island abundant with lush vegetation in the heart of the sea. Where Khidr steps green shoots come forth and all that he touches he brings to life again. This island is marked by a rock and located where the two seas meet each other. It is at this place where Moses is to meet the mysterious figure.

The story of Khidr is, thus, the story of a meeting, the meeting of the two planes of existence in which seekers live out their mystical quest. These levels are bound to space and not bound to space, bound to time and not bound to time. The unnamed servant, Khidr, makes the transition between the two planes, the two levels possible. It is Khidr who makes the passage between the two worlds possible. First he has to be sought out, to be recognized. Khidr is always there where the two planes meet: where the two seas meet, the sea of life and the sea of death.

But how do you know, how do you discover that place where the two seas or the two rivers meet? There is a specific sign through which Moses and his servant can recognize the place where the two seas meet: the miraculous coming to life of the cooked fish which the servant of Moses had prepared for breakfast. The cooked fish finds its way to the sea because of the special quality of the water at that particular spot: it is water of eternal life. The miracle of resurrection and transformation is symbolized by the revival of the cooked fish. Like the cooked fish, Alexander's companion becomes green—alive—by diving into the water of immortality. All that is touched by it comes to life again for eternity.

Where is the place where the two rivers or the two seas meet exactly? Some have made great efforts to try to locate the place geographically. Some argue that it may be the place where the two rivers, the White and the Blue Nile, meet. But one cannot indicate this place really in a geographical way. The truth is that one needs to find the teacher at the meeting place of past and future, light and darkness, the transient and the eternal. The mystical journey is always a searching for the meeting place. It is a travel toward another level than we are accustomed to. All that dwells upon the earth is perishing (fanin), yet still abides the face of the Lord, majestic, splendid (Qur'an, 28:88). This place is marked by a rock, the symbol of God's mercy; it is a refuge, a threshold, a place of rest for the weary travellers on the path.

To reach the water of mystical immortality which cannot be indicated geographically, the mystic must, like Gilgamesh, Alexander, Moses and his page, set out for the travel in the course of which he has also to cross the sea of death. Moses is motivated to make the journey to the place where the two seas meet to find the teacher who can give him direct knowledge of God. This is the holy knowledge the mystics are looking for. Only at that meeting point of the two levels of existence, only there can mystical knowledge be transmitted. But even Moses with all his eagerness and wisdom, and in spite of his special rank as prophet to whom God had spoken "mouth to mouth," even Moses did not recognize this meeting point when he reached the place where the two seas meet. So of course this is much more true for ordinary seekers.

Gilgamesh, Alexander, and Moses all embarked on their journey because they came to realize that on this plane of existence everything is bound to perish. All three men of great achievement and of huge egos become humbled when they realize that in the end everything perishes. All three stand for some grand achievement: there was no hero in ancient Mesopotamia mightier than Gilgamesh; there was no conqueror in antiquity more powerful than Alexander (the Great); there was no prophet in the Biblical tradition superior to Moses. Yet all three, attaining the summit of man's efforts, had to realize that all their achievements were transient, ephemeral, without real substance. Embarking on the journey is in itself a sign of a new attitude, an attitude of humility, poverty, and longing for true fulfilment.

We are told that as soon as Moses and his page, Joshua bin Nun, discovered that they had missed the meeting place with the teacher, they at once “returned upon their tracks, *retracing them*” the Qur’an says. To retrace one’s steps, to recognize one’s errors, is a crucial point of the path (*tariqa*). This is when the real transition takes place (*tawba*) repentance, a conversion of the heart.

As the seeker—like Moses, Alexander and Gilgamesh—promises to persevere in the travel, even if it means that he has to retrace his steps many times (“daily conversion” we call that in the Christian tradition), then in the right time and place he will meet Khidr, which will direct him step by step, stage by stage. When despair becomes greater than fear, it is Khidr who intervenes and comes to his help as the “remover of obstacles who can block the transformation.” This ever-present life force gives the seeker strength to change the direction of his erring life.

Searchers, mystics, are looking for a teacher out there, but the outer teacher always points to the teacher “in here,” the inner teacher. Ultimately, the search is for the Khidr within, and the meeting point of the two seas is where the two places converge within the core of our being, our own heart. At this point Khidr is waiting. Khidr comes in two ways. He has, as it were, two faces: He is both the *undertaker* and the *midwife*. He shatters illusions and delusions, and then gives meaning and direction to the soul’s search. He is a merciful benefactor, but he can also be a merciless destroyer, of customs and forms of thought. The teacher, like Khidr, is both the reviver of dead souls and the destroyer of illusions. Like Khidr, he too stands at the meeting point of the opposites within oneself.

Moses is a law-giver, messenger, the highest rank of prophecy. As a giver of Divine law he represents the highest values of justice and morality. But the teacher robs Moses of these values. Like Moses, who had to watch Khidr commit atrocious acts without being allowed to ask for an explanation, so the disciple. He must learn to acquire a new insight, to see things with a new perception, from a new vantage point. Because Khidr’s acts, even when he gives an explanation, still only seem arbitrary and mean. You are still wondering: Is this clear now? Does it solve anything? At some point must we simply grasp the truth that in the human condition, no answers can be complete?

conclusions

Finally I will try to draw some conclusions from this story for our subject: the role of stories in interreligious dialogue. There are all kinds of stories in the European tradition which are related to “the quest.” Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* may be seen as an example, one in which he elaborated existing stories. The story about the death of three rebels in the story of the Pardoner is an exemplum, of a text the love for money is the root of all evil. (That story is from an Arab source by the way!) And of course one of the most famous groups of stories is that of the search for the Holy Grail. In connection with the example of our story of Khidr, it is remarkable to think of our own European, “Green Man,” as it appears in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” That clearly is also a story of a quest, a search of a man for his destiny. And if we want to descend to the frivolous, remember the Hulk? Transforming himself to help others, he even turned green!

But is it such a good idea to refer to stories? It is well known that we live in the time when many stories—sacred and secular—seem to have lost their hold. Is the time passed when we could tell what we like to call “the” story in some straightforward way? When it is becoming more difficult to tell the Story—the history of Salvation, the Salvation, liberation through Jesus Christ—we might also think of paying more attention to the smaller stories, also authentic religious and biblical.

In the context of one of the great stories—namely the Christian one—I would like to refer briefly to the contemporary Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. We know that often in the case of the Bible the emphasis has been on the great story of Salvation. The whole of the Bible and its interpretation is seen as centred around that history of Salvation. Brueggemann asks attention for the small stories in the Bible. It is evident that this approach is congenial to postmodern perspective, as it focuses on “little” stories to the disadvantage of the “great story.” Focus on the little story requires us to be, to some extent, free of systematic perspective, and especially of systematic theology. The

imposition of modern critical or systematic theological categories upon the text has led us to read the text according to Hellenistic modes of rationality that have come to have most credibility in the modern world. Such a synthetic, rational approach, however, has required a violation of what is most characteristically Jewish in the text. For Jewish reading honors texts that are disjointed, "irrational," contradictory, paradoxical, ironic, and scandalous. In Bible reading, new texts require us to reread everything of God, self, and neighbour in light of neglected texts. Athens and Geneva together have conspired to suppress some texts, and Jerusalem has often been a willing accomplice. That suppression has tended to enforce the rationalistic hegemony of modernity, or the controlling-dominance of church orthodoxy.

The Bible is the compost pile that provides material for new life. As it is often with such compost, it contains seeds of its own. I submit that this way of reading the text (and reading our life) contains enormously helpful access points for pastoral care. The Bible provides a script (not the only script available) for a lived drama that contains all the ingredients for a whole life. The Bible offers many small dramas, some of which are not easily subordinated to the large "drama of salvation." As the Bible does not consist in a single, large drama, but in many small, disordered dramas, so our lives are not lived in a single, large unified drama. In fact, we are party to many little dramas. Brueggemann's argument is that the little dramas of the text need to be taken seriously. They ("little texts") need only to be told, as resources for the imagination, left there in that secret zone of intimate reflection to do their own hidden work. This fits in with my own concern for stories in interreligious dialogue.

When we begin to allow the little stories to question us, we will find a perhaps more confusing set of problems. For there are also the false stories and misleading stories. Stories of quest and pilgrimage and exodus have given Christians inspiration and encouragement through centuries. They have given inspiration to Pilgrim fathers coming to this land, for example, and also to the Boers in South Africa. But if the story has been inspirational, it has also been used to justify acts that have been harmful and brutal. What would the Indian or Black perspective be on these pilgrimages of faith? And while we may benefit from learning about the meanings of "green" in the stories of the Muslim tradition, this too can become misused as a cheap trick of inflammatory rhetoric, denouncing a so-called "Green Peril" in imagined threats from the Middle East. To bridge the gap between truth and falsehood one needs other kind of stories.

One such work is *The Bridge over the River Drina* by the Yugoslav Nobel prize-winning author Ivo Andric. He grew up in Bosnia: Serajewo and Visegrad. This novel is called the classical novel of the origin of the conflict in Bosnia. What Tolstoy's *War and Peace* meant for the Napoleonic wars, this novel could mean for Bosnia. Central in his book is the small town, Visegrad, which he describes since the time of the Ottoman/Turkish supremacy in the sixteenth century, the Austrian invasion until the beginning of the first World War. The fixed point is all the time the stone bridge over the river Drina, which not only symbolically connects past and future, but also provides the inevitable link between East and West, rich and poor, Serbs, Turks, Croats, Jews and Muslims in their effort towards a symbiosis. Observers have noted for decades how great are the similarities between Serbs and Croats. There is not an old cultural break: they speak the same language and have lived already for centuries next to each other. But our time has seen an unlearning of that common language as we have failed to tell the stories that will show our mutual understanding.

In another place in Bosnia, Mostar, the east and the westside of the Neretva river was for centuries connected by a beautiful bridge you found in every tourist guidebook of the former Yugoslavia. This bridge was built in 1566 by a student of the famous Ottoman architect Sinan, a jewel of Ottoman architecture connecting for over 400 years Muslims and Christians. In 1993 this connection was destroyed by Croatian militia, and one of the preconditions for justice and peace in this world of ours is that bridge will be rebuilt.

Back finally to my example of the Khidr story. The Islamic popular piety sees Khidr as a "saint" (*wali*) and there are those who say that every century will see his own Khidr or Khadir or Green Man. This story of Khidr from the Qur'an is, as we saw, from a multi-religious and multi-cultural

background: (Babylonian, Sumerian, Greek, Hellenistic and Jewish. It has also become an Islamic story. But it is not less inspiring for a Hindu or a Christian. It is a story anyone can understand who has ears to hear and a heart to understand. This particular story coming from this multi-religious and multi-cultural background can help us in our multi-religious and multi-cultural societies. It is namely the story of the need—yes, the necessity— of our personal transformation and the transformation of our societies. ✦

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✦ Readers of this issue will want to know that the Michaelmas issue, due out in mid-September, will include an expanded version of the remarks made in response to these two lectures by Professor Nelly van Doorn-Harder. After a summer's trip to Indonesia, where she has lived and worked at inter-religious dialogue for a number of years, Professor van Doorn-Harder will add further comments on specific dialogue processes to her original remarks.