REPRESENTING THE OTHER: LIMITS OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Delfo C. Canceran, OP[♦]
University of Santo Tomas, Manila

Abstract

This article tackles the problematic aspect of interreligious dialogue. Representation is not presentation because it takes place in language which cannot be contained or fixed. The primary reason is that the other is opaque and illusive. The alterity of the other remains ungraspable and undecidable. Thus, dialogue is always open to the unexpected wholly other that comes and surprises the self. This limit of representing the other does not paralyze the participants or actors in dialogue but challenges them to push and even break it.

Keywords: Dialogue, Religion, Representation

In this paper, I shall employ the theory of social representation as a perspective in viewing interreligious dialogue. Moreover, I shall interweave the theory of representation with the philosophy of the other in framing interreligious dialogue. In this way, we open and explore the possibilities of interreligious dialogue. Philosophically, the discourse on representation and alterity provides a possibility pushing the limits in interreligious dialogue. This possibility generates spaces for new perspectives beyond the usual expectation and anticipation. The analogy is reading. Reading takes place in the interaction between the reader and the text. In reading, we are neither determined by the restrictions of the intention of the author nor approach the text from a zero-degree beginning. When we read a text, we engage into dialogue because both the reader and the text are already inhabited by a constituted world. Moreover, in reading, we

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[♦]**Delfo C. Canceran** is a Dominican priest from the Philippines. Aside from teaching at the University of Santo Tomas (UST) in Manila, he is also the Vice President for Religious Affairs at the Colegio de San Juan de Letran (CSJL) in Bataan. Email: delfocanceran@yahoo.com

are neither digging the pure intention of the author buried in the text by capturing or recovering its pristine meaning nor we are sanitizing the text from any contamination or contagion by purgation or purification of meanings. Reading is an interpretative act in the generation of meanings. In the same way, in interreligious dialogue, we are not beginning from nothing, but rather we are already preceded by some historical antecedents that condition interreligious dialogue. Moreover, we are not starting from a virgin territory of interreligious dialogue, but we are already preceded by previous attempts and practices of people engaged into interreligious dialogue.

Theory of Representation

In his theory of representation, Stuart Hall summarizes the idea of representation in the fallowing assertion: "Representation is the production of meaning through language."[1] We need to dissect this assertion into two parts because they are loaded with underlying philosophical thoughts.

First, representation is linguistic. The world is inseparably linked with representation. We cannot capture the world as such; the world has been linguistically constituted. We cannot present the world as such; we can only represent it by language. In short, language represents the world. There are two ways to explain language. One, language is a channel of communication. Like a channel, it only transmits messages. Thus input equals output. They remain identical. Two, language is a system. In this view, language is a system of signs. The system is governed by difference. Thus, the meaning of language varies in that difference. Poststructuralist scholars reject the channel model and favour the system model. Language cannot follow the one to one correspondence between speakers or readers producing only a single or identical meaning. The system model allows the proliferation or multiplication of meanings by speakers or readers because participants in communication are free in these exchanges and the meanings are open to interpretations. In this way, language is a democratic exercise of freedom.

Second, meaning is productive. We know reality through language that represents it. Representation employs language composed of series of signs that substitute for reality found in the world. The world becomes significant and intelligible to us through the language

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[1]Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, London: Sage Publication in association with Open University, 1997, 28.

that we use. This language provides a cognitive map or universe of meaning that furnishes an understanding of the world. This language sorts out the world into different categories that endow meaning to it. This cognitive map or universe of meaning is shared and articulated by a group or a community. Meaning is produced by the work or practice of representation. That representation that people make signifies something. There are two ways of explaining meaning. One, meaning is archaeological. The speaker or reader knows the meaning by painstakingly digging or excavating the intention of the speaker or writer buried in the mind or hidden in the text. Once that intention is found or discovered, then the meaning is known. The meaning is fastened to the intention of the author. Since it comes directly from the author, the meaning is pristine. Two, meaning is created by the interplay between the word or text and the speaker or reader. The author cannot totally control or determine the meaning of the speech or text because the other speaker or reader is not deterred by the intention. The interaction between the interlocutors is productive in meaning-making. The meaning plays indefinitely. There is no way to purify or sanitize the meaning generated by the participants. There is always surplus or excess of making meaning.

The Alterity of the Other

Modern philosophy is enthralled with being and this being primarily refers to human being. In western philosophy, scholars conceive this with self-identity of human being characterized by rationality or consciousness. Although the Heideggerian being is historicized in time, it remains a self-disclosure. The dasein is the being thrown into the world whose understanding depends on its reception. Moreover, Husserlian ego privileges the self-consciousness of the individual whose intentionality is the origin of meaning. The intersubjectivity as a relationship of egos circulates between them in an identical manner. This ego is not only circular; it is also originary. Everything originates from consciousness and breeds meaning from it. In both being and ego, human being is self-referential.

Emmanuel Levinas counters this western preponderance to being and self by overturning the order of things. He reverses the hierarchy in western philosophy by giving primacy to the other over and above the self. This gesture retains the asymmetry in an inverted way. The self is now dethroned by the other that takes over the ascendancy. The other remains external or distant to the self who cannot grasp or seize it. The other remains an other. Jacques Derrida followed up the trajectory of the Levinasian other and carried on the discourse of the other. His deconstruction did not only reverse the hierarchy between

the self and the other but, more importantly, breaks open the space for the advent of the other. This advent of the other is an impossibility that surprises or shocks us. In his invention of the other, Derrida welcomes the other: He says: "This invention of the entirely other is beyond any possible status; I still call it invention because one gets ready for it, one makes this step destined to let the other come, come in. To invent would then to 'know' how to say 'come' and to answer the come of the other."[2]

The invention of the other is an impossibility. The other is out of shape for usual accommodation or assimilation to the same. There exists an asymmetry between the same and the other. The advent of the other shatters our horizon and rips the status quo. Since the other does not fall within the possible, it is therefore strictly impossible. In this manner, invention involves an experience of the impossible. This analysis of invention opens up the present in order to allow the advent of the other. Instead of predetermining the other, Derrida welcomes the other. Despite the uncertainty, he prepares the way for it. This coming is impossible because it is totally other.[3]

In another place, Derrida plays with the expression "*Tout autre est tout autre*" (Every other is entirely other). This expression is ambivalent because it says two things simultaneously: it is either tautological or heterological. In tautology, the other is an other, while, in heterology, the other is entirely different. This totally other connotes two references, first, as applied to God (religious) and second as applied to human being (ethical). However, at the end, the totally other as infinitely other can be applied to both God as a single being and human being as every other. Thus, on the one hand, the expression suggests the distance between God and human being — God is wholly other and a singularly other, while, on the other hand, this expression implies that *anything* which is other is wholly other or infinitely. Both references mean that the alterity of God is indistinguishable from the alterity of every human being. For the whole idea of the wholly other (*tout autre*) is that the wholly other is inaccessible and unbridgeable. The gap that separates them remains in that relationship.[4]

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[2]Jacques Derrida, "Psyche: Inventions of the Other," trans. Catherine Porter in *Reading Paul de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters & Wlad Godzick, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 45, 56.

[3]Jacques Derrida, "Psyche: Inventions of the Other," 45, 56.

[4]For Levinas, the wholly other, *tout autre*, means the other person taken on the model of the divine transcendence as wholly other. Derrida expands this wholly other from the exclusive use to God to every other human being. Derrida affirms a

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity includes religious identity.[5] Cultural identity refers to a sense of belongingness to a group and this belonging is based on shared characteristics such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, language, generation, locality and others. Moreover, cultural identity implies a sense of identification of an individual to a group. This identification includes a collection of various cultural identifiers such as location, ethnicity, history, nationality, language, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, taste and others. In this sense, cultural identity is a process which involves learning, accepting, choosing and modifying these cultural identifiers. It is the group that identifies its distinctiveness. Ordinarily, individuals internalize these beliefs, values, norms and tastes of their group and identify themselves with their practices. However, this internalization may be interrupted because of some significant interventions or interferences in the process. Moreover, identification may be unsteady because of some exposures and experiences that impinge on it. In this sense, cultural identity is uneven or uncertain due to some historical vicissitudes that alter the identity of the person or the group.

Thus, according to Stuart Hall, cultural identity is historical. "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation."[6] Hall underscores the place of history in the making of identity. This historization accounts for the transformation of identity. In this sense, identity is not an essence that one needs to recover and redeem because it is only buried or hidden underneath history, but a position that a group takes up as they undergo historical periods that impinge in their lives. The position that people assume in their historical moments accounts for the distinction of their identities and the pluralization of their identities. Each member of the group is not identical since each one can takes up a position or positions in various ways. Individuals do not resemble each other after all but undergo changes as they choose the position or positions they embrace in themselves.

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generalized other, every other is wholly other, *tout autre est tout autre*, from the alterity of God to the alterity of every person. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 78.

[5]See Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Culture*, Clifford Geertz, New York: Fontana Press, 1993, 87-125.

[6] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman, New York & London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, 394.

In his theory, Hall distinguishes the two different ways of looking at cultural identity.[7] First, cultural identity is an essentialized identity whereby this shared culture is founded on an authentic selfhood hidden inside the group. In this conception, cultural identity is the shared history of a group that reflects common experiences and shares cultural codes. This unity is the truth and the essence that holds the group. Second, cultural identity recognizes both the similarities as well as the differences that constitute a group. This identity is not fixed by a shared essence or truth but fragmented or fractured by historical forces. In short, this identity is not being but becoming. This dynamism can rupture or break the continuity of history and can transform identity. In this sense, identity is not an end but a project.

Thus, Hall employs the concept of identity not as an essentialist, but strategic one, not a fixed essence, but social position. Since position is not anchored on a fixed essence, it is ever shifting. The subject is becoming fragmented in the process composed of several, sometimes fractured and unresolved identities. These identities are historical, not biological, since subject assumes different positions at different times. In this sense, identity is continuously being shifted and constructed across different positions. These positions are constantly in the process of change.

The Force of the Limits

Oftentimes, we see limit in a negative sense as restrictive. However, we can also look at limit in a positive sense. Drawing from the Philosophy of the Limit, Drucilla Cornell explains the positivity or potentiality of limit when she argues: "The demonstration of the limit of meaning loosens that binds of convention […]. As the boundary recedes, we have more space to dream and reimagine our forms of life."[8] Here, we can draw some ideas of the limits in the positive sense. Thus, Cornel encourages us to confront the limits but these limits should not paralyze us to stretch our imagination. Imagination allows us to go beyond the limits. Umberto Unger supports Cornell in this regard when he says that "though it is your fate to live within conditional worlds, you also have the power to break outside them. You can work toward a situation that keeps alive the power to break the limits: to

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[7]Stuart Hall, "Who Needs Identity," in *Identity: A Reader*, P. du Guy, J. Evans, and P. Redman, ed. London: Sage Publcations, 2000, 15-30.

[8]Drucilla Cornell, "What is Ethical Feminism?," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, intro. Linda Nicholson, New York: Routledge, 1995, 95.

think thoughts that shatter the available cannon of reason and discourse."[9]

First, the limit is a devise that enables us to think of the beyond. If there is a limit, it does not mean that we are already enfeebled and paralyzed to stretch our imagination in pressing the limit. When we think beyond, we open a possible vista of knowledge and grope into the darkness. Thus, we need to rethink the limit that we impose on our concepts and frames so that we can break that constraint and enter into that aperture. Second, limit is really a challenge and not a boundary. This challenge unsettles our complacency with the status quo but brave the obstacle. We realize that limit is, in the end, a paradox. We want to go beyond what we already know but at the same time, we cannot state it yet. The limit provides a space beyond our horizon and shuffle along the way. The limits is only a construction imposed on us that can be undone if we try to reimagine our other possibilities.

Sources of Religion

Derrida asserts that the religion implies a fiduciary link or social bond. Religion involves two sources. To quote Jacques Derrida:

> Let us remember the hypothesis of these two sources: on the one hand, the fiduciary of confidence, trustworthiness or of trust and on the other hand, the unscathness of the unscathed […] But the gap between the opening of this possibility (as a universal structure) and the determinate necessity of this or that religion will always remain irreducible; and sometimes it operates within each religion, between on the one hand that which keeps it closest to its pure and proper possibility, and on the other hand, its own historically determined necessities or authorities.[10]

Thus, on the one hand, we have the experience of belief and, on the other hand, we have the experience of sacredness. He explains that the experience of belief includes faith of the utterly other in the experience of witnessing. This source is a relationship between the believer who testifies to God who is utterly other. The experience of sacredness refers to holiness of what he called unscathedness which refers to the pure and the intact, the sacrosanct and the divine, the safe and sound. In this sense, religion promotes the notion of the unscathed or the unharmed because of sacrifice offered to God as a compensation or restoration that reconstitutes holiness or purity. In

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[9]Umberto Unger, *Passion: An Essay on Personality*, New York: Free Press, 1984, 135.

[10]Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida & Gianni Vattimo, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989, 58-59.

religion, a gap exists between the universal possibility of faith and the particular determination of this or that religion, between the pure possibility of trust in God and the historical necessity of religion. The experience of faith is universal while the experience of this or that religion is particular. The witnessing of the believer joins the two sources since it assumes the experience of belief and the experience of sacredness.

Moreover, Derrida connects messianicity with testimony. The messianic opens the future and welcomes the advent of the other. The messianic as a singular event comes as an absolute surprise. This messianic belongs to the experience of belief which is knowledge. Faith funds and founds the social bond or relation to the other as a testimony. In this sense, faith cannot be identified with the particularity of religion. Thus, faith is more originary and foundational. This experience cannot be reduced to religion. Religion implies both a faith in the totally other who is inaccessible, infinite, transcendent in its absolute source and an institution that is separable, identifiable, circumscribable. Religion is institutionalized practices and governed by dogmas. This faith can neither be contained by institutional church nor be defined by dogmatic pronouncement. In this case, we can only testify as a confirmation of faith. Testimony is an experience of bearing witness to the absolute source.[11]

An Open Dialogue

Mikhail Bakhtin is famous due to his concepts of dialogue. Dialogue does not only involve two participants that exchange words such as speaker and listener but a third element of understanding that relates the speaker and the listener. To understand means to establish a relationship: understanding is not automatic but achieved by the participants — speaker and listener — in mutual relationship. Moreover, dialogue involves history that relates the past, the present and the future. In dialogue, we only experience the present and miss the past and the future. History is important in understanding of words used in dialogue. The words that we speak echo the voices of the past and will be cited in the future. In this way, we include the voices of the past speakers, the present author and future voices that form contexts for understanding. When we engage in dialogue, the present is interwoven with the past and the future. They participate in dialogue because they provide the contexts of understanding.

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[11]Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," 72, 93, 98.

Participants — speaker and listener — are circumscribed by history. This history enters into understanding of words or voices. The third element is the understanding as a potential possibility achieved by the participants in dialogue. Although understanding is not a participant in the dialogue, it is a speaking subject to the participants. Understands inevitably becomes the third element in the dialogue. The speaker utters a word to an addressee (the speaker addresses the word to a listener) whose response is anticipated (the listener answers the word). The third is the super-addressee that oversees the dialogue as God, truth, court, science, religion. [12]

We use word in dialogue and this word is boundless and the meaning of the word is open-ended.

> There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) — they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue.[13]

In a dialogue, we do not begin from a vacuum or nothing; we are always already constituted and represented by language. We use language that precedes our attendance and consciousness. Participants in dialogue speak in the present, but that present is haunted by the voices of the past and projected in the future. The present is not pure present but vitiated or the present cannot fully present itself. In this sense, participants in dialogue cannot be completely understood or known. They are always enveloped by obscurity. They cannot fully reveal themselves and, even if they reveal themselves, they cannot be fully be comprehended. Human consciousness is relational; it is an interaction of people. It is not a unified but fragmented entity between different participants in dialogue. Indeed, a single consciousness separate from interaction with other consciousnesses is impossible.

Moreover, dialogue is composed of different participants. These participants relate with others in a group and this relationship can influence each other. Participants speak in words and their words

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[12]There are three factors determining an utterance. First, there is the content with its objects and meaning. Second, there is the expressiveness, that is, the emotional-axiological relation of the speaker towards the content that could never be neutral — while being appropriated from other utterances. Third, there is the relationship of the speaker with the utterances, the existing and the anticipated ones.

[13]Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, 59.

interact with the words in dialogue. When a participant speaks, she brings into the dialogue the polyphonic words into the dialogue. A word is addressed to someone and that word anticipates an answer to that someone. Understanding needs a multitude of words, not held by a single word. Mutual engagement in dialogue leads to understanding. Thus, words cannot be enclosed or contained because it is productive or generative. The words that we use in dialogue are polyvalent or polysemic because they accumulate meanings in an ongoing history. There is no single meaning to be found in the world, but a vast multitude of contesting meanings. Truth is established by addressivity, engagement and commitment in a particular context. A word is historically contingent. "The word lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context."[14]

Interreligious Dialogue

From the foregoing discussions that lay down the nuances and complexities in entering into the world of the other and in engaging in dialogue with the other, we have to consider the openness and not closure of dialogue with the other. Thus, we put forward the following guidelines in doing interreligious dialogue:

1. Interreligious dialogue uses representation in words in our exchanges. We cannot take hold of the reality or world of the faith or religion of the other; we rely or depend on language composed of words where we signify the world and we interpret in the dialogue. We cannot therefore pretend to know the reality itself, but we humbly accept that there are mere representations that we use in our exchanges.

2. The alterity of the other prevents us from grasping or reducing the other. The other is infinitely or totally other. We can neither completely represent nor effectively substitute the other. We cannot be the spokesperson of the other. The other cannot be defined because of the surprise. The other resists containment in our representation. In this way, we always open the possibility of aterity of the other as she/he reveals herself/himself to us.

3. Cultural identity is dynamic. We cannot pin down the cultural/religious identity of a person or group. Identity can be transformed or altered in the process because we may change affiliation and seek new alliance. We are influenced by many forces at

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[14]Mikhail Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982, 284.

work around us that may impinge on our identity which could lead to the modification or transformation of our identity.

4. There is a limit to representation. However, limit should not mean just restriction, but a possibility for altering or transforming our horizon. We have to stretch our imagination and allow the interruption of the others in our exchanges. We are not forever unchanging in our identity but we are ever changing by the force of the other. We do not just rely on our received knowledge or tradition but we need to interrogate it through our encounter with the other and through a process of undecidability.

5. Dialogue with the other is boundless. The words that we use in our exchanges cannot be defined because they carry historical baggage from the past and anticipation in the future. The words in the present contain this range of possibilities and intertwinements. We cannot pin down these words because they contain surpluses and excesses. Dialogue requires openness to the infinite possibilities of meanings in our words that overlaps the present moment.

6. In engaging into religious dialogue, we position ourselves in various issues affecting us. These issues do not limit themselves to mere religion or to faith because our identity is marked by various identifiers. They range from political, economic, social, cultural, ethnic and sexual issues that intersect or intertwine with religion or faith. The position that we take are not fixed but shifting in various historical moments and interests that we prefer.

7. Religion should focus not just on the historical particularity of our religion but the universal possibility of faith. Faith is our response to the totally other that demands testimony. Faith cannot be reduced to religion, dogma or theology because the messianic that breaks into our experiences opens the possibility of alterity. The messianic is the advent of the other that comes to us beyond expectation and anticipation. The messianic is an absolute surprise.

Conclusion

In interreligious dialogue, we necessarily represent the other in language. In language, we employ words in our exchanges. We cannot get out from our religion and change place with the other. We view the other from our particular religious positions and interpret the other in those positions. In short, we cannot exchange positions but only open those positions from interruptions of the other. We can neither grasp the alterity of the other nor the language of the other. There are always excesses or surpluses of the other that we cannot pin down. The other resists any containment or definition. We may

think of this impossibility as the limits of interreligious dialogue imposed by the inadequate representations of the other. However, the limits should not be viewed as a negation of the possibility of interreligious dialogue; rather they are conditions of possibility of dialogue. Dialogue is not the reproduction or repetition of the same where participants exchange identical words as though they remain the same. Dialogue is the invention of the other where participants welcome the other without expectation and anticipation. The other is forever a surprise. In this regard, we open up the space for the advent of the other. Thus, limits do not constrain dialogue but, on the contrary, they enable dialogue because participants respect the different narratives of faiths. Dialogue cannot completely obliterate and traverse that difference that separates faiths. We will never finally arrive at a complete comprehension of other faith or a synthesis of different faiths. There is always an incommensurability of faiths. Positively, the limits evince the alterity of the other.