

The Interreligious Insight Paradigm an invitation

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Threshold, photo, Cetta Kenney

THE NEW MOMENT

As editors of *Interreligious Insight*, we believe that the experience of dialogue and engagement across worlds of religious difference represents a threshold phenomenon in our time. While the resources of our varied religious and humane traditions are available to help us negotiate this unfolding historical moment, there is a real sense in which we have not been at this threshold before. Fresh models of what living positively with religious difference entails are being required of us.

It is no exaggeration to say that a powerful momentum exists, as new opportunities for shared thinking and hopeful action across barriers of ignorance, suspicion and enmity are being explored and harnessed

We analyze this new phenomenon in terms of the following three dimensions:

- 1) as part of an expanding vision of global cultural evolution
- 2) as an experience of religious pluralism that generates a dialogical understanding of religious truth
- 3) as a profound ethical challenge to many of our inherited patterns of behavior and attitude towards unknown others.

We publish the “*Interreligious Insight Paradigm: an Invitation*” as the fruit both of our individual involvements with issues of dialogue and engagement over many years and of our editorial collaboration since the launching of *Interreligious Insight* in January 2003.

We are interested in your response to this formative statement. Whether you are in broad agreement or disagreement with it, we would be more than pleased to hear from you. Contact us: editors@interreligiousinsight.org

1) SEA CHANGE: CULTURAL EVOLUTION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

What would it be like to live in an age of astonishingly contradictory values, an age on which a major value shift had indeed descended? What would it be like to dwell in a time characterized almost equally – on the one hand – by the declining influence of time-honored, long-dominant notions, assumptions, and predispositions, and – on the other hand – by the slow but steady rise of countervailing ideas, hopeful models, and new inclinations? What would it feel like to stand in the very moment of the value crossing? Would one be riding the old wave down and out or the new one up and in? The questions are striking and important because ours is in fact a period of dramatically accelerated cultural evolution, an extremely rare period of “sea change”. It has two fundamental features:

Tolerance and dialogue are essential, because without them there is no peaceful exchange of ideas, and no way to arrive at agreed solutions allowing different societies to evolve in their own way.

— Kofi Annan,
Interreligious Insight,
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Older Wave	Newer Wave
Patriarchy	Gender Equity, Partnership
Inevitability and Usefulness of War	Non-violent Conflict Resolution, "Soft Power"
Inevitability of Social Imbalance and Injustice, Universal Human Rights as Unattainable	Social and Economic Justice and Human Rights as Realizable Goals
Manipulation of the Environment for Humans	Ecological Sensitivity and Sustainability
Cultural Superiority, Triumphalism	Intercultural Respect and Mutuality
Northern Domination of the Global South, Colonialism	Global North-South Cooperation
Disparate and Divisive Views of World Problems and Solutions	Emerging Global Consensus on Approaches to Peace, Justice, and Eco-Sustainability
State Power	Emerging Influence of Non-State Actors, Global Civil Society
Unilateralism on the International Stage	Multilateralism in Global Affairs
Religious Exclusivism	Religious Inclusivism and Pluralism, Global Interreligious Movement
Declining Interest in Spirituality	Deepening of Spiritual Practice
Mind and Body as Separate Entities	Exploration of the Mind-Body Connection
Higher Learning Dominated by Isolated Disciplines	Interdisciplinary, Integral Approaches to Learning and Knowledge

- *the seemingly sudden and precipitous decline of a long-dominant set of cultural values, ways of thinking, moral and ethical assumptions, and behaviors;*
- *the rise of a more complex, more evolved and more appropriate set of values, modes of understanding, moral-ethical insights, conscious choices, and ways of acting.*

The illustration opposite offers a brief tabular glimpse of some characteristic values of the older and newer waves.

The transition from the older to the newer complex of values can be represented by the crossing of two waves. As the long-dominant culture wave begins to decline in influence, the energy of the new wave grows. The decline and advance result directly from the increasingly poorer fit of old wave values with new realities and new understandings. Transition is triggered by the buildup of anomalies, which are observed realities that contradict assumed "facts". In a given cultural period, when the build-up of anomalies reaches a critical level, certainties begin to erode. Once in a very great while, when the dissonance is intense enough, things that are known "absolutely" are no longer certain at all and a sea change is underway.

The most important feature of the two-wave model is the period of crossing. There must come a point when the influence of the declining older wave and that of the ascending newer wave are approximately equal. That transition will necessarily be marked by chaotic change, vanishing certainties, identity crisis, and extremism. It will also be enriched by new understanding, energy, commitment, and spiritual growth. We believe that it has now arrived.

But there is a pressing question. If ours is indeed a time of rapid cultural change for the better, why does everything so often seem so wrong? Part of the answer is to be found in a phenomenon we might call an "eddy". When the rhythm of a smoothly flowing stream is disturbed, eddies can form. These

To revile
another's religion,
to make reckless
statements, to
break the heads
of innocent men,
to desecrate
temples and
mosques is a
denial of God.

— Mahatma Gandhi

are usually temporary whirlpools, roiling the water in their immediate vicinity but not significantly affecting the prevailing flow. In a time of major evolutionary culture change, when prevailing patterns are challenged and disrupted, a disturbance is created in the life experience of individuals or groups. If the perturbation is severe enough – if a sufficient number of persons or groups are affected or if significant concentrations of power are challenged – a major counter flow can form, and this is an “eddy”. The analogy is apt. In the context of the two-wave model, an eddy is a discernable and often destructive pattern of resistance to the decline of the older wave and the advance of the new.

One can identify any number of distinct eddies, including:

- *identity politics*
- *religious and political fundamentalism*
- *religious or nationalist extremism and terrorism*
- *increasing violence against women*
- *anti-ecological intransigence*
- *neo-imperialism*
- *suspicion of scientific understanding.*



Across Worlds, Chiang Mai, Thailand; photo Cetta Kenney

But in every case there exists persuasive evidence that the pattern in question does not represent the “cutting edge” of cultural change, but rather a reaction against the value change that is the real transformation. A reaction like fundamentalism may create enormous (and dangerous) turbulence in a changing world; it is extremely unlikely, however, to reverse a powerful evolutionary flow. Some of the most critical problems of our age need to be understood not as aspects of the declining older wave, and certainly not as features of the newer wave, but as phenomena of the crossing. They are dangerous but temporary counter flows that can slow but not stem the new tide.

The *Interreligious Insight* Paradigm draws on the two-wave (“sea change”) model as a powerful tool for analyzing and addressing most of the polarizations that are so characteristic of the late 20th and early 21st centuries – everything from global violence to globalization, from relations among nations to relations among religions, from evolution to genetics, from gender roles to gay rights, and from liberal-conservative politics to justice and peace. Understanding the dynamics of cultural evolution frames the new polarizations and suggests tools for understanding, engaging, and even healing the rifts.

One central component of cultural sea change is interreligious dialogue. The following section explores this dimension further.

(2) INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: A WAY TO TRUTH

Dialogue means “speaking across” worlds of difference. It is to be differentiated from both old-style monologue and redundant-style relativism. Monologue assumes that there can only be one authentic religious vision and relativism assumes that we simply have to live with a confusion of competing voices. Being able to “speak across” worlds of difference both overcomes the isolation of monologue and refuses the fate of relativism. What remains is the conversation.

On the basis of all the scholarly work in this field done so far, it is now possible to outline the content of a global ethic.

— Hans Küng
Interreligious Insight
Vol.1, No.1, 2003

In the midst of our multiple insecurities, we need now the confidence to recognize the irreducible, glorious dignity of difference.

— Jonathan Sacks
Interreligious Insight
Vol. 2, No. 3, 2004

We used to perceive the religious other as an object of suspicion or threat. In dialogue, however, the religious other is no longer a de-humanized object but a living subject from and with whom we can learn. Potential enemies are converted into potential partners. Religious vision and the possibilities for making a difference in the world are enriched because they are shared. One consequence is that the potential for religiously-motivated violence recedes.

Dialogue is both a process and a new way of articulating the varied transcendent vision and human transformation that lies at the heart of the religious approach to life. As a process, dialogue depends on giving and receiving: we offer the wisdom, values and truth of “our” tradition and we open ourselves to other articulations of the same. The process assumes at least the following attitudes and values:

- a) Listening for authenticity*
- b) Respect for differences*
- c) Willingness to learn from the other*
- d) Self-criticism*
- e) Moving beyond absolutism*
- f) Leaving behind relativism*
- g) Forging criteria to distinguish between true and false religious belief and practice.*

The dialogical combination of commitment with openness creates a dynamic momentum in which identity is forged afresh. Corners of the mind which retain superiority are surrendered in a process that is never-ending.

As a new way of pursuing religious truth, dialogue accepts that relationship between traditions assumes paramount importance: we define truth as both-and and not as either-or. In this mode, we are likely to welcome complementarities of vision over against the competition of visions associated with absolutism and relativism. We give full reign to the recognition that no one tradition can comprehend the fullness of ultimate truth. The distinction between the hidden mystery of ultimate reality and the apprehension of that reality in historical forms is key to fruitful dialogical encounter. All traditions embody some version of this distinction. Its corollary is that human language is necessarily indirect when it comes to describing our experience of ultimate reality.

In dialogue, partners articulate their basic experiences and developing traditions in conversation with one another. They will then learn about each other and in particular be challenged to overcome stereotypical images of one another. Such images are deep-rooted and only hard listening will lead to their removal. The fruit, however, will be new discoveries. As trust grows, participants learn tolerance of one another, yet they may still keep a respectful distance. We exist alongside one another in parallel

live; yet, the negotiation of similarities and differences begins in earnest. Eventually, dialogue leads to a deeper interaction whereby participants move beyond tolerance and learn to live within the space between different basic visions. This is a space that is vulnerable and risky, but its fruit is the mutuality of belonging: we become a community of communities.

The space between the assumption that “we’re all the same” and the insistence that “we’re all different” is where dialogue flourishes. Plainly, the religions are not all the same – we have different origins, histories and spiritualities. Yet neither are they all different, in the sense that no family resemblances can be discerned between them. We inhabit one earth and we have powers to exercise human empathy across many boundaries. Followers from many traditions seek transcendent vision and human transformation, no matter how variously these are shaped symbolically and worked out in practice. If we were all the same there would be no need to talk to one another; if we were hopelessly sealed in separate rooms there would be no possibility of talking at all!

The giving and receiving of dialogue is demanding spiritual work. For this reason, dialogue aims to embody relationships of trustful acceptance, critical friendship and mutual accountability. We are neither quick to judge nor uncritical in outlook. Worlds of difference really are strange to one another. Yet the ability to “speak across” worlds of difference means that we are able to resonate with the authenticity of the subjective other. We are many communities yet one community; we are far apart yet belong together. In dialogue, we move between strangeness and resonance.

Dialogue cannot flourish in a de-contextualized bubble. Traditions encounter one another on a global canvas. Religious truth is a transforming truth and therefore it exists for the sake of making a difference in the world. In this sense, a dialogical community of interreligious being and activity becomes a model community in the transformation of all life. Justice, peace, sustainability, compassion and community are articulated and lived out as a collective witness to the

The common values that most of the world’s religions hold in relation to the natural world might be summarized as reverence, respect, restraint, redistribution and responsibility.

— Mary Evelyn Tucker
Interreligious Insight
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Clean water; photo, Jim Kenney

global future. The world needs religions in conversation, not religions in competition.

Let us say that interreligious dialogue is both what the world yearns for from the religions and what the religions at their best do offer. It is more than a process and represents a paradigm shift in religious consciousness. As such, it becomes a central component in the sea change of global evolution.

(3) INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT: A MORAL CODE OF PRACTICE

Modern means of transport and communications have annihilated distances and brought peoples of the world nearer to one another than ever before. No country, culture or religious tradition remains any longer in isolation. Every part of the world is increasingly becoming multireligious and multicultural. Although the world has become small, it remains culturally and religiously very rich.

In the emerging global environment, we welcome these diverse currents of world religions and their potential contributions to the welfare of humankind and the planet as a whole. The religions are vehicles that enable humanity's search for those deeper truths and realities that motivate us and point us towards a fulfilling vision for the future.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the world faces a whole range of conflicts which can be analyzed in multiple forms – religious, socio-political, economic, environmental and existential. Given that the roots of conflict are often complex it is generally more helpful to see the various analyses as interrelated. In turn, this means not only that destructive individual behavior needs changing but also that destructive institutional behavior needs to be confronted.

At their best, the religions point to a basic spiritual requirement of transcendent vision and human transformation at the heart of all human endeavor, individual and collective. This requirement may be channeled differently by the religions, but all believe

that basic moral and human values stem from it. The “golden rule” in one form or another and the exhortation to transcend the ego are present in all religions. All teach that human relationships are more important than our material possessions. All teach that service of the poor, the sick, the helpless and the oppressed is service to that which transcends all of us, however it is named. It follows that the different religions should cooperate with one another in dealing with basic personal and institutional structural problems.

If the religions are to influence humankind for good and work for the development of all peoples, then they must put their own houses in order first. They have too much to lose by staying apart, and so much to gain by working together. They must learn ways both of healing the legacy of history's bitter interreligious rivalries and of celebrating the positive experiences of cooperation from the past. When religions meet one another, they must learn to combine trust with critical fellowship.

The time is ripe for a reorientation of the religious outlook on a world scale. We have to relinquish inherited prejudices so that we can live with open hearts and minds. In the interests of forging peaceful interreligious relations, we offer a Moral Code of Practice which includes at least the following recommendations:

- a) *Respect the noble teachings and values of others' religions*
- b) *Acknowledge the rights of others to follow their own paths*
- c) *Respect the civil and political rights of religious minorities*
- d) *Promote constructive steps towards interreligious harmony*
- e) *Take positive steps to heal the religious antagonisms of the past*
- f) *Refrain from abusing others' religious beliefs and practices*

Behold, We have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another.

— Holy Qur'an (49:13)

Compassion is the universal religion.

— Tenzin Gyatsho, the XIVth Dalai Lama

- g) *While commending one's own religion, avoid condemning one's neighbor's*
- h) *Forbid violence against innocent persons in the name of religion*
- i) *Prevent gender, racial, and ethnic discrimination in the name of religion*
- j) *Relinquish religious biases and prejudices, inherited or acquired*
- k) *Work together for the sake of establishing spiritual and humane values at the heart of life*
- l) *Be open to the best influences that stem from modern knowledge and serious investigation of both the natural world by the sciences and the human world by the humanities and social sciences*
- m) *Adopt a critical attitude towards your own perspectives before criticizing others.*

Not all religious beliefs and values are compatible with one another. But it is likely that many perspectives will be complementary to one another. Where we differ profoundly we shall need to learn respect. Where a religion promotes violence or oppression in violation of the Moral Code of Practice it is to be rejected. Not everything labeled spiritual or moral is acceptable.

The world has suffered too much because of wars fought in the name of religion. There has been enough of faultfinding in and condemnation of others' religions in history. The attitude of intolerance has not brought and cannot bring peace and happiness to any society or nation or to humanity at large. The exaltation

of terrorism in the name of religion is particularly tragic. The third millennium requires a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation among the followers of different faiths.

The great religions are not the possession of one community or group; they belong to humanity. They should firmly and cooperatively raise their voices,

individually and collectively, against the menace of violence and war, terrorism and extremism, and against social, economic and racial injustices. This entails challenging the institutions that shape our world in the public square with the basic spiritual and moral values that we all share.

Furthermore, the religions should emphasize that the means adopted to solve these problems should be in keeping with the dignity of humanity. Religious leaders must make a commitment to talk together, walk together and work together for the welfare of humanity and the planet.

Religious pluralism is a fact; the great religions are forces to be reckoned with. Vast resources and power for good reside in them. But they are frequently misused and exploited for selfish and narrow purposes. Through self-criticism and dialogue there lies another way.

THE INVITATION

This Paradigm is offered as a new means for understanding the religious complexity that is emerging in our times. It believes that we do stand on the threshold of a different way of being religious. Moreover, it is hopeful in so far as it seeks a new vision. There are signs of positive change in the direction that we have sketched. But the scope for further change is endless.

We invite you, our readers, to respond to the *Interreligious Insight* Paradigm. The pages of the journal will be placed at your disposal so that together we may pursue an honest exploration of how the Paradigm can be shaped as a collective understanding.

Email address for your response:
editors@interreligiousinsight.org



Paz, Justicia y Dignidad, Mexico; photo, Cetta Kenney

Many faith communities speak of development first and foremost as a process of transformation – transformation of society but above all transformation of oneself.

— Wendy Tyndale
 Interreligious Insight
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