

# DIALOGUE IN CONFLICT – CONFLICT IN DIALOGUE: UNEXPECTED *LOCI* OF INTERRELIGIOUS THEOLOGY

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## Abstract

Dialogue is often associated with balance and harmony. However, conflict issues are a reality for both interreligious relations and current debates about Islam. Dialogue can become an issue of conflict itself, and the relationship between dialogue and conflict a key issue of interreligious theology. Starting with perspectives of Swiss grass-root actors in interreligious dialogue, this paper analyses the relationship between conflict and dialogue with reference to the sociology of conflict. The latter highlights that conflicts are an integral part of social relations and, indeed, can even contribute to social cohesion. Conflicts can become *loci* of interreligious theological reflection, challenging Muslim and Christian resources in respect to conflict transformation. Reconciliation is one such major tool. With reference to this tool, different theological positions can be seen to enter into dialogue among themselves and with the sociology of conflict. Conflict transformation and reconciliation can interpret each other and so may function as a bilingual public theology. Thus dialogue may be seen as an integral part of conflict management, and conflict as an integral part of dialogue.

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## INTRODUCTION

Interreligious dialogue as an interaction aimed at mutual understanding. It lays claim to contribute in a significant manner to social cohesion and peaceful cohabitation. Debates on Islam and Muslims currently constitute one of the main areas of challenge for contemporary European societies. These often tend to be controversial in the sense of conflicts based on opposing standpoints and convictions. Frequently, they refer to religious symbols and their visibility in the public sphere (Göle 2015). The most prominent examples are conflicts about the construction of

mosques and minarets or about women wearing a veil (hijab) in public. Such debates concerning Islam are often linked with the effects of war and terror attacks, thus creating a rather harsh atmosphere as a starting point for interreligious dialogue with Muslims (Mohagheghi 2004). Although in most cases conflicts are not directly interreligious as such, nevertheless they become a focus of interreligious dialogue and, at a secondary level, also the *loci* of interreligious theological reflection. It is a dialogue that takes place in a triangular relationship between, on the one hand, adherents of two or more religions and, on the other, secular society and the state. In a holistic sense, interreligious dialogue will always consider the social context and the situation of the dialogue actors within it (Schmid 2014). What happens in society, particularly if it concerns religious issues and values, cannot be irrelevant for interreligious dialogue.

To what extent and in which manner interreligious dialogue can contribute to conflict management and regulation depends on several issues, such as the object – cause, focus, concern – of the conflict, or the social role of the dialogue actors. A key factor is also how the relationship between dialogue and conflict is perceived in order to be aware in what way dialogue can be linked to a given conflict. Critics of interreligious dialogue often argue that dialogue is based on a naive and unreal ideal of harmony with a view to avoiding conflict and therefore this detracts from engaging concrete social issues (Sperber 2000, 151f.). In this paper, I want to present a different position that emphasizes the links and even necessary connection between conflict and dialogue.

When I refer to conflict this is not so much interreligious conflict in a narrow sense but social conflict in which religious communities operate and which also may have consequences for interreligious relations. Conflict can first of all be seen as a menace for harmonious living together. Dialogue, as a positive and consensus-oriented interaction, could therefore be regarded as an instrument to overcome differences and asymmetries thus contributing to the cohesion of diverging tendencies and the attempt to regulate the conflict. Sociological theory also emphasizes the positive functions of conflict which makes the function of dialogue slightly different. Conflict, however, can also be considered as characteristic of dynamic societies. A context of conflict can foster identities, revive norms, and help a society adapt to new circumstances. The role of religions in conflicts, however, is ambivalent. They can reinforce conflicts; but they can also contribute to their de-escalation. Thus, the relationship between dialogue and conflict has to be reconsidered by taking into account insights from both a sociology of conflict and also from

theological reflection upon conflict. Due to the ambivalence of conflicts, they constitute a particular challenge for an interreligious theology, for dialogue may be regarded as exacerbating the conflict in some way.

The issue of dialogue and conflict is extensively debated in diplomacy and peace studies (Rieker/Thune 2015). In the field of studies on interreligious dialogue the function of conflict within or in relation to dialogue, and vice versa, has rarely been examined. For example, conflict is mainly considered as something negative by being necessarily linked with violence (Valkenberg 2006, VII). Therefore, many authors see dialogue as inherently opposed to conflict; it is rather a means of “conflict resolution” (Smith 2017, 149). Thus the interreligious choice amounts, in effect, to “cooperation or conflict” (Bennett 2008, 6). On the other hand, there is an emphasis on the problematic of conflict in interreligious relations in that “an interreligious consensus that removes the conflict between the religions” (Moyaert 2011, 268) is not realistic. Paul Hedges speaks about dialogue as “embedded within controversy” (Hedges 2011, 1), but refers less to the social context. In a recent handbook (Cornille 2013), conflict is not considered as a cutting across interreligious relations, but as a particular issue relegated to a chapter on religion and peacebuilding (Kadayifci-Orellana 2013).

It is therefore necessary to take a fresh look at the issue of conflict in interreligious relations and theology. The following reflection is structured in four steps: In the *first* section I take an empirical approach in which I consider and compare three examples of reflections by Swiss grass-root actors on interreligious dialogue. These show, on the one hand, that dialogue seeks to promote ideals of goodwill and harmony and, on the other, that there are attempts to attain a more critical level of dialogical engagement. In the *second* section these positions are re-read in the light of the sociology of conflict. Despite the positive potential of social conflicts there is the need for resources in order to avoid negative dynamics of conflict. In the *third* section, social reflection is related to interreligious theology in performing the task of perception and interpretation of social reality. The theological paradigms of reconciliation linked with liberation, and with particular manifestations in different Muslim and Christian perspectives, can deepen social interpretations of conflict. In the final *fourth* section I draw some conclusions and apply them to the practice of interreligious dialogue. I argue that interreligious dialogue can contribute to bridging emerging differences and asymmetries as well as strengthening the cohesion of diverging tendencies. It can thus be conceived as an attempt to manage conflict. Dialogue and conflict are to be understood as intricately linked together.

## 1. BALANCING HARMONY AND CONFLICT – VOICES OF DIALOGUE ACTORS

Declarations on interreligious issues play an important role. Muslim organizations regularly encounter mistrust and are confronted with many critical issues. Formal written declarations help to clarify their self-understanding and make themselves more transparent for other social actors and the majority society. As well, churches often publish documents which provide information about Islam and about the church's attitude towards dialogue. Whereas Muslim declarations are mainly addressed to the majority society, the texts of the churches are addressed primarily to their congregations and staff confronted with the issues raised in the texts. Finally, there are interreligious groups and organizations which also try to raise their voice and provide a more inclusive and bridging position. Sometimes this is achieved by way of a common authorship of responsible persons belonging to different religions providing a different – especially a cohesive cross-religious – perspective in the public debate. By formulating common statements, leaders and participants with different religious affiliations transmit a message of harmony and social cohesion as a concrete reality, not just a pious hope.

The following examples are taken from the Swiss context which, on the one hand, is characterized by a fairly high social cohesion whilst, on the other, constitutes a rather polemical mode of debate that had its climax in the minaret ban in 2009 (cf. Pratt 2016). It would be possible to find comparable texts and documents from other countries with equal foci. But the aim here is not a cross-country comparison, rather a systematic reflection on dialogue and conflict for which the examples should provide a starting-point. In my brief analysis I refer to one selected document of each type – one by a Muslim organisation, one by a church, and one by an interreligious group. Each of the documents was published in a different period and context. The following panorama illustrates both a timeline and a spectrum of three different voices. My main intention however is to examine the relationship between more harmonious and potentially conflictive aspects as seen by the texts.

The first example is the 2005 mission statement of the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Zurich (Vereinigung Islamischer Organisationen in Zürich, VIOZ) which is the cantonal Muslim organization in the Canton of Zurich. VIOZ comprises altogether 34 local associations and is one of the most important and effective Muslim umbrella organizations

in the whole of Switzerland. The mission statement<sup>1</sup> can be seen in the context of debates in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and which led to Muslim declarations in other European countries in which a positive relationship between Muslims and the secular state was formulated (Rohe 2008, 73). VIOZ declares that it favours constitutional democracy, human rights as formulated by the United Nations, gender equality, integration, and interreligious dialogue. At the end it also mentions the bases of Muslim faith – the five pillars of Islam – and strategic aims such as legal recognition, dedicated graveyards, and the building of a central mosque in Zurich. The document notes:

Islam means to surrender to God and thus peace. Human beings should live in peace and harmony with God, with themselves, with their fellow human beings, with the fauna and the flora. VIOZ considers the plurality of religions, denominations, peoples, cultures and civilizations as a manifestation of divine will and as a universal law. To get to know people with different convictions is the way to keep this plurality in peace.<sup>2</sup>

Peace is seen here as a multidimensional relationship. Plurality is considered as a challenge, but one that is anchored in God's will. Dialogue as a means to know one another is seen as a means to keep this situation in a peaceful balance. The above statement is followed by a paragraph in which the VIOZ rejects all kind of violence and terrorism. Peace can thus be seen as a counter-strategy and as a fundament for living together in a plural society.

The second example is taken from the document on “The Church and Islam. About Future Interreligious Action” of the Reformed Church in the Canton of Zurich.<sup>3</sup> This was published in 2010 as an explicit reaction to the minaret ban which is mentioned in the main or primary title: “After the Minaret Vote 2009” (Nach der Minarettabstimmung 2009). The document has a more general character, but the minaret vote was the occasion to start a new reflection on interreligious dialogue that might be convincing for both its advocates and its sceptics. The document provides analyses of the contemporary situation of Islam and interreligious

<sup>1</sup> Vereinigung Islamischer Organisationen in Zürich (VIOZ) 2005, *Grundsatzklärung der VIOZ*. See: [http://vioz.ch/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/VIOZ-Grundsatzklärung\\_050327a.pdf](http://vioz.ch/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/VIOZ-Grundsatzklärung_050327a.pdf) [accessed 26.07.2017]

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. All translations from the original German throughout this article are by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Evangelisch-reformierte Landeskirche des Kantons Zürich 2010, *Nach der Minarettabstimmung 2009. Kirche und Islam. Zum zukünftigen interreligiösen Handeln, Zürich*. Available from: [https://issuu.com/zhrefch/docs/kirche\\_und\\_islam\\_2009](https://issuu.com/zhrefch/docs/kirche_und_islam_2009) [accessed 26.07.2017].

dialogue. The document notes that: “Two extreme positions dominate the current public debate: On the one hand Islam is accused of being at its core a violent religion. On the other hand conservative Muslims increasingly adopt a position of dogmatic apologetics, rejecting all kind of criticism”.<sup>4</sup> It also states unambiguously: “The result of the minaret vote is deplorable but it provides an opportunity to conduct more problem- and solution-oriented interreligious dialogue in the future. A serious dialogue is always based on mutual respect. But on this basis actors can and should well challenge one another and request something from one another”.<sup>5</sup> This statement implies a critique of a consensus-oriented dialogue and proposes a more challenging version of dialogue. In a further section of the document, referring to the generally positive situation of living together in Switzerland, it is stated: “This does not mean that there are no tensions and conflicts”.<sup>6</sup> The aim is thus to include more controversial aspects and conflictive interactions within the scope of dialogue. Examples mentioned are Christmas celebrations in schools, full-face covering of women, and the situation of Christians in Muslim majority countries.

The third example is a text of the network “Interreligiöser Think-Tank” with the title “A New ‘We’ – Switzerland in the Year 2020” published in 2014.<sup>7</sup> This text has a more utopian character and can be seen as a kind of counter-narrative to the more controversial debate after 2009. The network is composed of Christian, Muslim and Jewish women with theological training and a long period of interreligious experience. The much longer guidelines formulated by this group provides a profound reflection on interreligious dialogue (cf. Berlis 2016; Tunger-Zanetti/Schneuwly Purdie 2014, 593). The text looked at here is a much shorter document. It starts by criticizing the backward-oriented and protectionist attitude in Switzerland and takes a more cosmopolitan standpoint. The authors observe the harsher tone often taken in debates on migration, foreigners and asylum-seekers. And even the Christians try to sharpen their profile by referring, for example, to the “Christian Occident”. After their critical analysis the authors present a counter-narrative:

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Interreligiöser Think-Tank 2014, *Ein neues “Wir” – Die Schweiz im Jahr 2020*. See: [http://www.interrelthinktank.ch/index.php/statements/item/download/4\\_603995a2cd-0779b77094bba5d7156c2e](http://www.interrelthinktank.ch/index.php/statements/item/download/4_603995a2cd-0779b77094bba5d7156c2e) [accessed 26.07.2017].

What is missing is a different narration of Switzerland, transmitting a positive and future-oriented image of the country within a global and pluralistic world. A Switzerland with visions for a new “we”. [...] Switzerland in the year 2020 is a country committed to humanity, equality, fairness and sustainability. A country not susceptible to the extremes, but in search of balance, temperance and justice in all ways. [...] In this Switzerland political and social debates will be conducted in a way that will allow all convictions to contribute in a constructive way.<sup>8</sup>

In this vision all kinds of extremes have been overcome. It depicts a social debate open to all on an equal level and without any asymmetries and inequalities. The vision is of a highly inclusive society enabling diverse religious practice in the public sphere. In the final section of the declaration the authors refer to the positive role of religion.

The texts highlight ideals of living together and participation in social debates. Pluralism is considered as the key challenge by all three documents. It is partly demanded to include problems and divergent views within dialogue. It is also evident that the context of the three texts is very different and that their authors operate in very diverse situations. The document by the VIOZ illustrates that a Muslim group needs to overcome mistrust and prejudices and therefore has to emphasize peaceful and harmonious interactions. Their intention is to prove that the organization is well integrated and that it does not give cause for any conflict. The Reformed Church, on the other hand, is in a well-established position and thus able to criticize and to take a more sceptical stance in dialogue. The comparison between these two documents and their authors also shows which dynamics might be entailed in the process of reception. Whereas the document of the Reformed Church might be read by Muslims as a slight step-back from dialogue, a similar position by a Muslim group could probably be misunderstood as confrontational and as a rejection of integration, thus incorporating a key topos of Islam debates. Not surprisingly, it is an independent think-tank that proposes a fairly unorthodox and uncommon view of Swiss society and its dynamics. It could be discussed further what such a utopian counter-narrative means for conflict transformation. Even if conflict is not present visibly in the visionary section of the document, it is the subtext of this document which represents one possible way to deal with social conflicts. What is lacking explicitly in these three documents, however, is an explicit interpretation of conflict. Conflicts cannot be ignored. An exclusion of the conflict

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

issues would mean an alienation of the dialogue from social reality. What can be the contribution of sociological and theological reflection to the dialogue so that conflict issues become an integral part of it? How are conflict and dialogue related?

## 2. HOW TO REINTERPRET AND TO TRANSFORM CONFLICTS – SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

I refer here to a school of sociology that considers conflict to have not only a negative impact, but also a positive function. I start with the German pioneer of sociology, Georg Simmel, as providing the classic position, and then turn to Lewis Coser, who develops Simmel's thought further. These positions are rooted in different contexts in which cultural-religious conflicts are albeit not prominent, and where the role of the media as a reinforcing factor in conflict dynamics is not taken into account. But nevertheless they provide some important insight which can be applied to the present day context.

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) identifies conflict as one of the basic dynamics of society. Because all parties involved are interested in the issue of conflict and its resolution, the creation of a connection can be observed between them. Simmel describes the human soul, as well as society, as characterized by opposing motions of convergence and divergence, harmony and disharmony, which can be balanced through conflict only: “In fact, the actually dissociating activities are the origins of conflict – hate and envy, need and desire. A conflict breaks out only based on them; thus it is actually a curative move against the dualism leading towards division, and a way to work out some kind of unity” (Simmel 2009, 227). Simmel speaks of the “sociologically affirmative nature of conflict” (ibid). For him it is not unity that constitutes the basic category for describing social relations, but rather that unity and conflict operate on the same level. He thus states that “opposition and strife not only precedes such unity, but are functioning in it in every moment of their lives – so there could not be any kind of social unity, in which the converging directions of elements would not be permeated inextricably by the diverging ones” (Simmel 2009, 228).

Conflict is operative within unity. In this logic, conflict does not have to be overcome in order to achieve unity, but conflict and unity are parallel and simultaneous dynamic modes. For Simmel, conflict constitutes a form of socialization, creating community. But conflicts still remain

ambivalent. There is always an inherent risk of disintegration, so that conflicts might create deeper division between the conflictual parties instead of bridging them. Having looked at how conflicts can be understood, the issue is how they can be transformed in a positive sense in order to avoid negative and harmful effects in the development, or outworking, of the conflicts. In this sense there is no “conflict resolution”, but only a target-orientated “conflict management” as the opposite of conflict escalation. Among the many ways to transform conflicts (Galtung 2001), here I address just two of them.

First, there is *compromise* (Simmel 2009, 299), in the sense of the disputed objects of a given conflict being either divided and shared among the disputants, or compensated by something else – some other, neutral agency – instead. An exchange of the objects of dispute is arranged, but this is only possible in conflicts involving distribution. Many conflicts are rather identity conflicts, or strongly imply identity issues. In such cases a compromise is usually difficult or even impossible to achieve as identities cannot be ‘divided’ or redistributed. Second, in contrast to the more objective mode of compromise, there is the more subjective tool of *reconciliation* which Simmel characterizes as follows: “[...] there is something irrational in reconciliation as well as in forgiveness, something like a denial of what one was even just a moment ago” (ibid, 301). Reconciliation implies a dynamic of discontinuity, but in a positive sense. For Simmel, reconciliation does not mean the avoidance of a conflict but constitutes rather an emotional process within conflict, leading to a transformation of emotions and so also of attitudes and perceptions. Reconciliation is the opposite of irreconcilability, which implies that “something in the soul has been killed that is not to be brought to life again” (ibid, 304). Simmel compares it with a lost limb. When speaking about reconciliation he makes some references to religious and mystical traditions explicating reconciliation and links this with forgiveness, but without going into further details. This opens the prospect for a dialogue between Simmel’s sociological insights and theological discussions about reconciliation, which I address below, in the third section of this paper.

It was Lewis Coser (1913–2003) who elaborated and systematized Simmel’s positions. With this development, several aspects concerning the relationship between dialogue and conflict can be explored further. Coser makes the distinction between absolute conflicts aiming at a complete annihilation, and other types of more or less institutionalized conflicts. Their “termination involves a reciprocal activity and cannot be understood simply as a unilateral imposition of the will of the stronger

on the weaker” (Coser 1961, 348). Due to this “reciprocal activity”, dialogue is a key element in dealing with conflicts and transforming them. Conflict reinforces interaction and enables interlocutors to discover familiarity between the parties. “Hostile interaction thus often leads to subsequent friendly interaction, conflict being a means to ‘test’ and ‘know’ the previously unknown. The stranger may become familiar through one’s struggle with him” (Coser 1956, 122). Having gone through conflict, the relationship may even be more intense afterwards. Thus conflict can even function as an “index of stability of relationship” (ibid, 81) and as an “Index of the better integration of a minority group in the total community” (ibid, 84). Although conflicts are ambivalent, risky and potentially very confrontational, they are a positive sign for the existence of a relationship. They are a kind of “test of power between antagonistic parties” (ibid, 137) leading to a balanced equilibrium.

The intensity and ambivalence of conflict depends highly on the constitution of the system in which the conflict takes place. Here Coser differentiates: “More elastic systems, which allow the open and direct expression of conflict within them and which adjust to the shifting balance of power which these conflicts both indicate and bring about, are less likely to be menaced by basic and explosive alignments within their midst” (Coser 1957, 202). This may be valid for groups as well as for the society as a whole. Elsewhere Coser distinguishes between groups open to conflict and others who are not (Coser 1956, 101–103). These examples illustrate how Coser, in a much more elaborated way than Simmel, highlights and explores several positive functions of conflict. Conflicts give rise to a recourse to social norms, which are revitalized and actualized. They can be considered as one of the main indicators of a flexible society and as a contradiction to rigid and change-resistant systems. Conflicts contain the chance to intensify relationships, to develop new values, and to adapt the society to a new situation.

Summing up, the function of dialogue in conflict can be twofold. First, it can be a means to discover and strengthen the positive dynamics within multi-dimensional social relations. Conflict always requires consensus as a basis for any sort of resolution, and this may in reality mean simply some form of management of the underlying conflictual situation so as to ameliorate the effects of the root dissension. If a consensus is not evident, conflict management by way of constraining regulations may need to be negotiated. This can certainly be a task of dialogue. Second, dialogue can be a resource to transform conflicts which, as highly dynamic processes, offer a lot of space for transformative action.

Reconciliation as a key issue of conflict transformation implies interpretation in the way that the opposing forces and conflict are seen positively and not in the sense of a static antagonism. Further, reconciliation means a transformation of action and attitudes that should be undertaken together by the conflict parties. The underlying issue is how religious ideals can encourage and support these processes.

### 3. ENTANGLING DIMENSIONS OF RECONCILIATION – PERSPECTIVES OF INTERRELIGIOUS THEOLOGY

Having explored some key ideas of sociology of conflict and shown on this basis links between conflict and dialogue, I turn now to some theological reflection. First of all, it has to be mentioned that the notion of there being positive functions of religion concerning conflict is not at all self-evident. Indeed, one position might be to say that religious issues always provoke conflicts and that therefore conflict regulation and transformation should be undertaken on a merely secular basis (Kadayifci-Orellana 2015, 431). But ignorance towards religious issues will not convince the religious actors in conflicts. Any conflict transformation needs to start with references also to their positions. On the other hand, it would be futile not to mobilize religious resources for conflict transformation. Thus I propose a theological reflection, not a mono-religious but rather a dialogical and interreligious one.

By interreligious theology I understand a theological reflection that refers to more than one religious tradition and which takes place in a dialogical mode. Interreligious theology responds to religious pluralization, but is not required to adopt the ideological conviction of religious pluralism (Schmidt-Leukel 2017, 9). In this sense it not only aims at elucidating common propositions, but also at exploring differences between the various theologies. Concerning social issues, interreligious theology is characterized by the fact that different religions are confronted with the same social reality and thus not only share common contexts and concerns, but a common relationship *per se* between theology and society (Schmid 2014). It may be undertaken by two or more theologians together or – as in the case of this paper – by one theologian rooted in a specific tradition but who regularly conducts interreligious dialogues and studies texts and positions of other religions. Interreligious theology and conflict will not be analysed through taking an historical perspective, exploring which conflicts were constitutive for the respective

religion and thus inscribed into its grammar. The focus will rather be topological, referring to current conflicts. Conflicts in the context of living together will be seen here as a *locus theologicus*, not in the sense that conflict itself has a necessary theological character, but it provokes questions such as: How is human dignity of those involved in conflicts respected? How do conflictual events concern Christian and Muslim speech about God?

The concept of locus is closely linked to that of signs of the times (prominent in the declaration *Gaudium et spes* of Vatican II) which can be understood as “landmark(s) of sorts for detecting the divine presence” (Sander 2013, 37). This implies an openness of theology to visit and explore conflicts. The interreligious approach allows different religions to face crucial questions together: arguably, “religions can jointly address, self-critically examine, and, if possible, solve, or at least control, the religious roots of interreligious conflicts” (Schmidt-Leukel 2017, 11). Many different issues could be analysed with this approach, but the actual focus will be on reconciliation which has been highlighted by Simmel as a key concept for conflict transformation. The spectrum of theologies of reconciliation is large, especially in Christian theology. I therefore refer to two positions that link theological reflection with peace and conflict studies.

The first comes from the author Mohammed Abu-Nimer, professor for International Peace and Conflict Resolution at the American University School of International Service in Washington DC. He links peace studies with Muslim thought, and grassroots projects of reconciliation with academic reflection. He aims at a “theory of nonviolence and peacebuilding principles and values from an Islamic perspective and within an Islamic context” (Abu-Nimer 2000-2001, 218). His position is referred to by other authors when dealing with Islam and reconciliation (Herbert 2006). In his monograph on peacebuilding there is a section on forgiveness which he considers to be a necessary part of reconciliation (Abu-Nimer 2001, 245). Abu-Nimer stresses both individual and social dimensions. He considers overcoming fear and revenge as a virtue, and linked with prayer as a transformative force. This implies a social function in the sense of a critique of power by renouncing revenge. He further speaks about the “processes and values of restoration through forgiveness and compassion” (Abu-Nimer 2003, 68). Ongoing retribution is overcome by forgiveness. He refers to Qur’an 2:178 where retaliation (*qisas*) is replaced by the payment of a fee which is considered as a sign of God’s mercy. “Thus, humans are expected to initiate a process of restoring their

relationship [...]” (ibid, 69). In this regard he refers to Abdelaziz Sachedina who declares that retributive justice “should aim at redressing the wrong by making the offender acknowledge responsibility and encouraging the victim to consider alternatives to the perpetuation of violence through retribution” (Sachedina 2001, 112). Elsewhere, referring to Qur’an (49:10; 4:128; 4:114) and the prophetic tradition, Abu-Nimer emphasizes: “In short, based on Islamic values, aggression and violent confrontation, bigotry, and exclusion are less effective than peacebuilding and nonviolent methods in resolving problems” (Abu-Nimer 2000-2001, 217). A procedure that implements this process, going back to Bedouin traditions, is *sulh* which encompasses the ideas and dynamics of remedy, forgiveness, punishment and recognition (Pely 2016, 26; Philpott 2015, 161–163). It is an agreement, or rather ritual endorsement, on the outcome of a mediation process (Abu-Nimer 2001, 99). Thus Abu-Nimer seeks to mobilize the religious and cultural resources of Islam in order to counter-balance the widespread focus on war and violence.

The second position comes from the German protestant theologian Wolfgang Huber in a volume on ethics of peace co-authored with Hans-Richard Reuter. After an historical approach to peace, and a discussion on contemporary key challenges including an analysis of church positions, the authors conclude with a theological and ethical section. Within this they dedicate a whole chapter to reconciliation which they introduce as a term describing a relationship based on hope. This is first of all focused on God, but at the same time considers conflict as ambivalent (Huber/Reuter 1989, 224). The authors base their reflection mainly on a biblical perspective in which reconciliation can be described as “a process of restoring comprehensive right relationship or righteousness” (Philpott 2010, 98). Through Christ and his non-violent commitment, the vicious circle of reproducing victims is broken (Huber/Reuter 1989, 231). Huber and Reuter see the basis of reconciliation in forgiveness and refer particularly to Col. 1:15–20 and Eph. 2:14–17 as passages of reconciliation where Christ is depicted as a universal principle of reconciliation given effect through the cross, which dismantles antagonism between humans and so brings about peace (ibid, 233). At present, the church becomes somehow the exemplary community of reconciliation which remains universal and aims to encompass the whole world. But the process of reconciliation is incomplete and will only be finalized in the future. The authors refer to the risk that the church may become an “instrument of exclusion” and reconciliation therefore “a possession and thereby a means to break communication and to excommunicate” (ibid, 235). They

are thus critical towards a kind of church exclusivism that might claim to dispose of reconciliation as a human possession.

The comparison of the positions espoused by Abu-Nimer and Huber/Reuter helps to highlight communalities and differences, and how the two perspectives may interpret each other. Abu-Nimer describes reconciliation as follows. “When reconciliation is achieved, the relationship between the parties is transformed or changed from its conflictual pattern into a new mode of interaction. Under the new conditions, the parties have developed a new sense of awareness of their dependent relationship. The norm is now to include rather than to exclude the other” (Abu-Nimer 2001, 246). Abu-Nimer stresses, above all, the change being into something new effected through the process of reconciliation. Becoming aware of their mutual dependence, the actors find a way to be inclusive. But there are several structural prerequisites for this, above all recognition “of victimhood on all sides” (ibid, 247) and also equality. Huber/Reuter illustrate what the new relationship can mean. “Reconciliation as a unification of what was separated does not however require assimilation, but is based on liberation. Reconciliation does not signify appropriation, but recognition of what cannot be integrated” (Huber/Reuter 1989, 235). In the antithetic syntactic structure (“but”), reconciliation is described in a somewhat paradoxical manner. It is not just an embellishing euphemistic reinterpretation of an unjust situation, but presupposes liberation. The new relationship is characterized by both proximity and distance necessitating respect for difference.

In a theological sense, reconciliation means a change of perspective enabled by God and therefore being at the same time intangible for humans. Having experienced God’s forgiveness it is easier to conclude a conflict; thus soteriological and ethical approaches are closely linked with one another (cf. Aulén 2003). The Muslim and Christian perspective share the entanglement of the vertical and horizontal dimension of peace and reconciliation. Based on the reconciling relationship with God they have the rupture of the vicious circle of violence and counter-violence in common. Thus Daniel Philpott, in his monograph on peace and reconciliation, claims that an “overlapping consensus” between Jewish, Christian and Islamic ethics on reconciliation is possible (Philpott 2015, 152). However, it is evident that there are still two major differences. In a Christian theology of reconciliation Christ, as the reconciler, and the church, as the community of reconciliation, play a crucial role. In a Muslim reflection reconciliation and forgiveness take place in an inter-human relationship and describes more the interaction of the conflictual

actors. For Abu-Nimer it is most important that reconciliation is *not* a euphemist reinterpretation, but rather a structural transformation so that the relationship between the conflicted parties is no longer one of dominance but one of partnership in which may be realized “the full potential of the two groups” (Abu-Nimer 2001, 246). The aim is to activate peace-building forces and thereby to establish an “ownership of conflict among the parties” (Abu-Nimer 2003, 57). But Huber and Reuter also counter-balance a potentially triumphalist understanding of reconciliation by stressing its universal and future-oriented character. “Reconciliation is the name for constructive future prospects in conflict” (Huber/Reuter 1989, 235). They refer to 2 Cor. 5:20 (“we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God”, NKJV) as illustrating that the supplication and request which cannot appropriate (and thus dominate) the other is the just mode of reconciliation. This also leads to Huber’s focus on legal ethics and the ethics of responsibility (Huber 1993; Huber/Reuter 1989, 256–269).

The comparative reflections show that it is important to bring the two dimensions of reconciliation – between human and human and between human and God – into a balance. Universal reconciliation can provide a motivation to reconcile, but this process of reconciliation always takes place in a very particular context and situation which needs to be transferred by reconciliation.

#### 4. RECONCILIATION AND TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION – CONCLUSIONS AND EXAMPLES

Whereas theological reflection provides insight into the basis of reconciliation, sociology of conflict can help to understand the mechanisms and interactions within a conflict in more detail. Sociology of conflict may also help to understand reconciliation not as replacement of conflict but as an integral part of conflict dynamics. Relating sociological and interreligious reflection to each other enables the following conclusions to be drawn.

1. Conflicts involve interpretations and therefore offer a lot of space for creative re-interpretation. How they are seen depends highly on the dispositions and status of different groups or subjects. Whereas some people might be very vulnerable and fragile, others are able to withstand even harsh conflicts without feeling personally offended.

Whereas some might be in a strong position in society so that they can cope with harsh conflict, others will be inclined to adapt and concede a retreat. How to deal not only with strength but also with weakness in conflict situations might be another topic of religious reflection.

2. Reconciliation does not mean transformation in the sense of a euphemistic interpretation of conflicts or neglecting difficulties. Antagonistic forces in conflict and the paradox between unity and disintegration will always remain. Thus reconciliation needs to be understood as a continuous process with an always outstanding termination.
3. Whereas for Simmel reconciliation is a highly subjective, individualist and anthropocentric mode of conflict transformation, theological reflection considers it to be a broader process involving God and the whole of humanity. Religious ideas might strengthen motivations and inspire processes of transformation. In peace studies it is also recognized that cultural and religious values may favour reconciliation (Kadayifci-Orellana 2015, 452s; Santa-Barbara 2007, 184). Such a focus on reconciliation may also counter-balance the current security-oriented perspective on Islam and Muslims which is focused on control, observation and legal regulation. However, reconciliation relies more on the dynamics of interaction and capacity for change.
4. Liberation and reconciliation – with specific Christian and Muslim connotations – are complementary and can balance one another. Liberation means also liberation from injustice and being subject to false accusations and prejudicial generalizations. For religious actors God can become a liberating third force in a conflict, encouraging them to view the conflict in a new manner and to start “faith-based reconciliation efforts” (Maddison 2016, 199). Conflict is inscribed within the structure of both Islam and Christianity.
5. Reconciliation requires the conflict parties’ willingness to cooperate through dialogue on an equal level. Thus dialogue can be seen as a key tool of reconciliation. One-sided transformative action, however, will also influence the dynamics of a conflict and can be the first step to start a process of reconciliation.
6. Conflict transformation and reconciliation can interpret each other and can be used in the sense of a bilingual public theology (cf. Day 2017). By this public theology I understand a theology which expresses itself simultaneously both in a general philosophical and in a specific theological language, daring to refer to Scripture and religious idioms in public discourse. The analyses shows that religious ideas do not stand alone, but rather that “corresponding rationales in

other traditions and in secular idioms” (Philpott 2010, 120) also apply. That Simmel uses reconciliation, a term with strong theological connotations, and that the Greek term *katallagē* used by Paul (e.g., 2 Cor. 5:18) was used in secular contexts in the sense of “a change from anger, enmity, or hostility, to love, friendship, or intimacy” (Fitzmyer 1981, 165), shows that a clear separation of secular and religious terms is not possible. Rather, there are often strong interdependencies and processes of transfer. However, differences in meaning remain. Although Simmel links reconciliation with irreconcilability without mentioning clear criteria as to when either becomes effective, particularly in the Christian tradition, reconciliation is considered nonetheless as universal and all-encompassing.

These conclusions illustrate how important it is to link religious and social dimensions of conflict and reconciliation. The focus on reconciliation in this paper represents only one of several possibilities. There is no one single approach for conflict transformation. As Galtung states, a combined approach of different concepts and procedures is often fruitful (Galtung 2001, 19). Reconciliation, however, can be a field in which the encounter of social sciences and theology may be very complementary with obvious synergies. The starting point has been a concrete social context with different dialogue actors formulating their positions. From there a sociological and theological reflection has begun. This approach might be paradigmatic for an interreligious theology in close relationship with a wider society. In order to understand the *loci* and in order to be communicative effectively within the larger framework of a pluralist society, it is necessary to include social sciences in this process.

To be sure, conflict itself can sometimes be understood as a serious threat to peaceful cohabitation and dialogue. Current debates within and about Islam also show that dialogue is not self-evident. Rather, there is often a strong dispute about it, so that one can say there exists *dialogue in conflict*. On the other hand, dialogue may be seen as a useful tool to bridge emerging differences and asymmetries as well as to strengthen the cohesion of diverging tendencies and, therefore, as an attempt to manage conflict – *conflict in dialogue*. Thus, dialogue and conflict belong, and are intricately linked, together. This means conflict needs to be conceptualized as an integral part of a *dialogue in conflict*. Therefore, I want finally to apply the results of this discussion to concrete interreligious dialogue and debates on Islam. The three declarations in the first section of the paper illustrated how difficult it is to broach the issue of *conflict*

*in dialogue*. I also demonstrated that the possibilities of such declarations are limited and that the different religious communities are in different situations which bring about particular expectations addressed to them by both their members and society. Nevertheless, the reflection on conflict, transformation and reconciliation might stimulate the understanding of *dialogue in conflict* and its positive dynamics. Peace and conflict studies also show that declarations represent only a limited mode of conflict management.

I propose several ways to modify the common understanding of conflict by transformative action. First, Muslim communities are often considered as closed and non-transparent. By way of the activities of opening the doors of their mosques on certain occasions, or even regularly, this perception can be overcome. This happens, for instance, with the project of an open mosque in Mannheim, Germany (Keßner 2004). Instead of focusing on religious actors, the social action of the associations can be highlighted (Malik 2013). This would not mean that the religious dimensions should be neglected, but that they could be seen as fruitful for society as a whole. Since Islamic centres are often considered to be places of radicalization, they can transform themselves into partners for prevention and integration (Ceylan/Kiefer 2014). Instead of considering them to be victims of conflicts they can be seen as being in a struggle for recognition (cf. Honneth 1995, 160–170). By these and other measures conflicts will not disappear, but they are taken seriously as key elements of social relations open for transformation. Transformative action implies a transformation of injustice and social asymmetries towards mutual recognition. This is a challenge not only for Muslims but for all social and political actors.

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