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Addressing Structural Asymmetries Between Majority and Minority

The Swiss Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue

Introduction

In 2008, an association was formed in Switzerland called the Interreligiöser Think-Tank that sees itself as an “institutionally independent association of exponents of interreligious dialogue in Switzerland” (Interreligiöser Think-Tank 2008: Article 2). These opinion leaders seek “the promotion of co-existence with equal rights of the various religious communities in Switzerland.” Thus, the association takes a position in current debates on religious politics and social issues and develops new approaches and ground-breaking ideas for dialogue. The Think-Tank has, for example, taken a position on the referendum on the ban on building minarets (2009) (see Pratt 2013 and Tanner et al. 2009) and on the discussion on banning face coverings (popularly called the Burka Ban, the Burkaverbot) in 2016 (Interreligiöser Think-Tank 2016). In the summer of 2014, the Think-Tank took a look at the Switzerland of the future in 2020 and urged the development of a “new ‘We’” (a new cohesive group). In these reflections on Switzerland as a country “which has devoted itself to humanity, equality, fairness and sustainability” (Interreligiöser Think-Tank 2014) religion is a central “resource” for this “new We” (Interreligiöser Think-Tank 2014: 3). A declared concern of the Think-Tank is to make the interreligious know-how of its members accessible to a wider public and to pass on its own reflection and practice of dialogue. The so-called “exponents” of the association (and authors of the statements and appeals) are Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women with many years of experience in interreligious dialogue and dealing with the public. As individuals, they published on interreligious questions, in some cases for decades (see, among others, Strahm and Kalsky 2006 and Lenzin 2010). Most

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1 I am grateful to Hector Davie (Bern) for his English translation.
2 www.interrelthinktank.ch (last accessed 15 December 2016).
3 A campaign for a “new we,” initiated by Manuela Kalsky, Director of the Dominican Centre for Theology and Society (DSTS) in Nijmegen, has been underway for a long time in the Netherlands. See www.nieuwwij.nl.
4 According to the summary found at www.interrelthinktank.ch.
of them are pioneers of interreligious dialogue in Switzerland, raising consciousness of interfaith questions.

With its *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Interreligious Think-Tank 2015), the Think-Tank targets both newcomers and experienced people planning interreligious events. The aim is to provide help in avoiding gaffes and stumbling blocks. The guide is written jointly by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women and is also directed mainly at members of these three monotheistic religions “because it seems to us that the potential for tension and conflict is greatest here” (VII). *Guidelines* consists of two parts—“Fundamental Reflections” (1-23) and “Practical Guidelines for Successful inter-religious Dialogue” (24-79)—and conclude with a “check-list for the planning of interfaith events” (80-83).

For me, *Guidelines* raised the following questions, which are discussed in more detail below. What motivates these women to make this commitment? What preconceptions lie behind their understanding of interreligious dialogue? What understanding of minority or majority does *Guidelines* present? In what way is this understanding recognizable in the aims and support that the authors give their readers?

*Preconceptions and Bases: A Respectful “Dialogue on an Equal Footing”*

*Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue* was originally published in 2013 in German as *Leitfaden für den Interreligiösen Dialog* (Interreligiöser Think-Tank 2013) and reissued several times in the following years because of high demand in the German-speaking world. As a motto, the authors use Hannah Arendt’s statement (from her work *Vita Activa*) that a common world “exists only in the multiplicity of its perspectives.” Guideline is inspired by the longing for a good and just life for all (VII), for coexistence “peacefully in a spirit of fairness and mutual respect” (VII). However, the Balkan wars have taught us that it is not enough “only to live alongside one another.” Instead, “our common future” requires us to live together in “a well-informed, well-networked and empathetic way” (3). The context of secularization is taken very seriously (5-6); not only do many people regard religion as a private matter but they also perceive a “fundamental contradiction between religious attitudes and human rights” (6).

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5 The page references to individual quotations are given in brackets in the main text.


7 Arendt 1997: 73; quoted in Interreligious Think Tank 2015: vi.
Increasingly fewer people “really understand religious attitudes, and the trains of thought they give rise to” (6). The perceptions of Guidelines are based on, among other things, WIN/Gallup International Religiosity and Atheism Index, which shows a significant reduction in religious identity in Switzerland over the period between 2005 and 2012. These findings are supported by other surveys. In a long-term study a few years ago, the Swiss National Research Program “Religious Communities, State and Society” investigated the religious practice and spirituality of the Swiss population. One of the conclusions the researchers reached was that 85% of the respondents believe that religions in general tend to lead to “conflict rather than peace” (Neue Zürcher Zeitung 2014 [28 October]: 11). This perception is connected closely to attacks and terrorist acts worldwide that people living in the West are informed about almost daily in the media. Historically as well, however, the less people are informed about the inner life of religions and churches, the more they tend to take notice of (external) conflicts. Thus, most people in countries shaped by Christianity have heard of the crusades, the Inquisition, or the persecution of witches. But they will have heard less about the efforts at reconciliation and rapprochement between churches and religions over the centuries. There were such attempts, but they have been shown to have often been regarded by their contemporaries as only marginal or scarcely noticed and were often rejected, or even condemned, and were—until the 19th/20th century with the rise of the Ecumenical Movement and other movements—very limited in their effects.

The authors see the challenge of our time and of interreligious dialogue as finding “a way of tackling these tensions between religious and non-religious thinking” (6).

Majority and Minority in Interreligious Dialogue

Minority and majority are perceived in Guidelines at several levels: in relation to actual size (historically and at the present day) as well as with regard to asymmetries in dialogue. At the beginning of Guidelines, the authors point out that there have been significant minorities of Jewish and Muslim people throughout the history of Europe—with the consequence of “mutual exchange and enrichment across religious boundaries” (VI). The authors point to a different “collective memory of the Christian majority in Europe.” In this “false perception,” the relationship with Judaism and Islam is remembered as “characterised by enmity and hatred”—this had “terrible results” (VI). In Guidelines, the “experience of adherents of the Christian majority religion in Switzerland” is a factor, but “the experience of adherents of the Jewish and Muslim

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8 In 2005, 71% of the Swiss population described themselves as “religious”; in 2012 this was only 50%. See Inter-Religious Think-Tank 2015, 5, n. 4.

9 While it is important to mention the history, it is a pity that these remarks are not supported by concrete historical examples and references.
minorities” (IX) is the most prominent. All three religious backgrounds are present in Guidelines, both on a reflective and an experiential level. Although the representatives of the “Christian majority religion” are named (and identified with the three established churches, the Evangelical Reformed Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Old Catholic Church in Switzerland, [4]), no further differentiation (for example, about different ecclesiologies and theologies) among them is made. The focus is on the difference in size, their socio-economic conditions, and their respective legal status\(^{10}\) within society.

The present situation means that religious minorities in a conversation are usually set against a much larger group, which knows little about the other religion. Thus, it can happen that an individual (a Muslim, for instance) is questioned and has to ‘defend’ his or her religion (6). This changes the nature of the conversation. The representative of the minority is not an equal partner but assumes the “role of respondent”: she has no say in the conditions of the dialogue (6). While the majority religion is often represented in religious dialogues by theological experts, the minority is often represented by a lay person (6).

There is also an inequality in relation to gender: women often organize inter-religious dialogue on practical everyday religious issues such as food, education, life phases, and prayer.\(^{11}\) This is often a “dialogue of life” (7), about *convivencia*, “different people living together in a way that is good, fair and open” (7) in a context of migration. The authors also explain the orientation to practice by the fact that women do not usually exercise leadership and religious authority in their religions (8). The dialogue of women among themselves can therefore be conducted more openly and freely, generally in a way that is also more relevant to everyday life but at the same time less binding in that women often cannot stand as official representatives of their religious community. The question of the representation of a religious community by women has, however, been transformed in recent years in Jewish and Christian communities in Switzerland. Nonetheless, the public faces of a religion are still largely men (as shown, for example, in the Swiss Council of Religions [see Winter 2015] founded in 2006). It seems particularly important that the authors ask whether there can actually be an equal discussion between representatives of majority and minority religions. This question arises not only in the observation of who is talking to whom (experts versus non-specialists, an uninformed majority against a minority who are informed but driven into taking a defensive position) but also in relation to the content of the discussion: Who determines what is being talked about? Here, for instance, the question of women proves to be a delicate issue.

\(^{10}\) Jewish communities also have a special legal status in particular Swiss cantons. Cf. Inter-Religious Think-Tank 2015: 4.

\(^{11}\) An example of this orientation is the publication by Bechmann *et al.* 2001.
Representatives of the (Christian) majority often assume that women are worse off in Judaism and Islam (10). This is partly through historical forgetfulness that it was only in the twentieth century that female members of Christian churches also gained the right to take part in discussions and to be involved in ecclesiastical offices and services and also because of prejudices and stereotypes about the backwardness of Islam, in particular. The current almost daily confrontation with Islamist terrorism reinforces such deep-seated prejudices, which can easily be subsumed under a long historical tradition of the exoticization of the Orient, which was traditionally also expressed in the “oriental other,” especially in women’s bodies (10) (see Brunotte 2015 and Sohn-Kronthaler 2016). The other religion is classified as alien and “fundamentally at odds with Swiss policies about the equality of the sexes” (10). It is a well-known strategy to present the other side as a counter-pole and thus to strengthen one’s own identity as enlightened and non-discriminatory. It is an important concern of Guidelines to avoid a trap like this, the danger of which is more likely to increase than decrease in a climate that is becoming more and more critical of religion, as in today’s Switzerland.

Guidelines also addresses the fears and susceptibilities of minorities in majority societies, such as the fear that the dialogue that is sought is only a new or hidden form of the majority’s mission to convert the minority (21).

Objectives and Assistance in Guidelines

Anyone entering into dialogue should make clear what the objectives are. These can be numerous, starting with mutual understanding and confidence building, and the elimination of stereotypes and possible conflicts—especially conflicts that are actually political or social but are carried out under the pretext of religion and which often harden rather than dissolve (Inter-Religious Think-Tank 2015, 13-19). One of the examples, the authors give here—that Muslims are said to be “not capable of living in a democracy” (13)—has been applied mutatis

\[\text{12 On the subject of human and women’s rights in Islam, see Manea 2015 and Loretan 2015.}\]

\[\text{13 The authors point to an increasing incomprehension with regard to religious practice in the process of secularisation. An example they give is a decision by the Provincial Court of Cologne in 2012 on the religious circumcision of boys, which caused a huge controversy (Inter-Religious Think-Tank 2015: 4-6). The authors indicate a challenge for interfaith dialogue: “to find a way of tackling these tensions between religious and non-religious thinking” (6). They also mention political forums that support communication and information (14).}\]
mutandis in the past to label religious communities within Christianity\textsuperscript{14} A declared goal of interreligious dialogues is to strengthen the peaceful coexistence of different religions in society, to find common values that can form the basis of joint action.

*Guidelines* is grounded in the authors’ desire to pass on their own experiences as Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women in a dialogue that has been going on for a long time already (26-27). This generous and generative intention is reflected in sixteen guidelines, which are based on concrete practical examples.\textsuperscript{15}

The practical examples are based more on examples from the majority society and the Christian majority religion. Many examples demonstrate how representatives of majorities encounter a minority regarded as “alien,” without first doubting or questioning their own preconceptions. Such representatives can sometimes be perceived as somewhat insensitive in their approach. Despite this observation—which is also a self-criticism—*Guidelines* also wants to help members of religious minorities achieve successful interreligious encounters.

The sixteen guidelines or rules for dialogue cannot be discussed in detail in this article. Many of them explicitly or implicitly contain references to majorities and minorities. The third dialogue rule on “structural asymmetry” explicitly states that interreligious dialogue is not “free from issues of power and dominance” (35). Critically, it is noted that the majority position is, of course, considered to be objective or neutral, “while it is assumed that people from a minority group want a subjective and prejudiced view” (38). The direction, the definition of the themes, the power of their interpretation—all these lie in the hands of the majority. Thus, the position of a majority or a minority runs the risk of being set in stone once and for all. Pragmatically, *Guidelines* recommends leaving the minority religions to organize such events themselves. All in all, *Guidelines* is based on the insight that all those involved in dialogue are pupils trying to perceive the world and religion through the eyes of others, to speak to each other from the heart and to shape the world and religion together with care.

\textsuperscript{14} In the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, especially during the *Kulturkampf*, Roman Catholics were viewed with suspicion regarding their loyalty to the state because they were obedient to a foreign power (the Pope).

\textsuperscript{15} As far as the rules for dialogue are concerned, the authors use Hartkemeyer 2010 as a source and adapt these rules, in light of their own experiences (drawn from, for instance, the European Project for Inter-Religious Learning [EPIL]), to the Swiss context. Cf. Inter-Religious Think-Tank 2015: 26-27.
The presentation and analysis of *Guidelines* point to a growing awareness over the last decades of the necessity and fruitfulness of interreligious dialogue. The authors do not want to leave this dialogue only to official (still mostly male) representatives of religions. Instead, they want to stimulate a broad dialogue in which the entire population, at least the part that wants to get involved in such talks, can participate in principle.

*Guidelines* addresses clichés and stereotypes, as well as the prevailing ignorance about “others” and provides for dialogue in the context of recent social developments in migration and in discourses about secularization and the development of religious affiliations. The authors recognize the asymmetrical basic structures of interreligious dialogue in Switzerland and explicitly address the problems of the majority and minority in these dialogues at different levels. The fact that this constellation also plays a role among women is shown in an unobtrusive way. At the same time, they equip women for their role as agents of change.

The perception of “majority” and “minority” is based on the observation that Switzerland has changed in recent decades from a Christian to a religiously pluralistic society. *Guidelines* avoids the thin ice of distinguishing between a “native” and an “immigrant” religion. However, the majority and minority relations within the individual religions, especially within the “Christian majority religion,” are not sufficiently addressed and—although they are basically acknowledged, as “diversity within all the religions involved” (2-3)—they are nevertheless underestimated. While *Guidelines* directs the reader to the structural asymmetries in interreligious dialogue, the structural asymmetries within the Christian majority religion are scarcely perceived.\(^\text{16}\) While it is noted that parties to the dialogue should clarify their position within their own religious community, this is ultimately more about representativeness, dichotomies, and power relations than about intrareligious theological differences and distinctions. This points to a fundamental problem of interreligious dialogue—in contrast to intrareligious, ecumenical dialogue.

*Guidelines* avoids statements about differences between Judaism and Islam. However, both religions have a different history in Switzerland, which has led to differing legal and social positions.\(^\text{17}\) Overall, however, *Guidelines* provides extraordinarily valuable support for encounters between members of different

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\(^{16}\) As an Old Catholic, I immediately note that the Old Catholic Church of Switzerland is indeed mentioned, but apart from this, people seeking the church’s opinion always have recourse to the two larger churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Reformed Church. The wider Christian spectrum in Switzerland (which includes members of the Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Free Churches) with the many differences within and between those churches is left unspecified.

\(^{17}\) The history of Judaism in Switzerland has only been studied critically in the last few years, mostly at a cantonal level. See, for example, Bloch and Picard 2014.
religions. The fact that the guidelines are not based on a dialogue but on a tria-
logue, involving the three monotheistic religions, is their great strength. In the
face of terror and violence, they show the importance of an open and honest
exchange in which the other person can be recognized in her or his everyday
religious life. In commending a radical respectful attitude towards others on an
equal footing, the suggestions can also be used in encounters with other reli-
gions. It would be interesting to test these guidelines in areas other than the
Swiss or the German-speaking context—which is made possible by the trans-
lation of this document into English.

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