

# Gadamer's Hermeneutics as a Challenge of Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue \*

Franz Gmainer-Pranzl

“Hermeneutics” is not only a topic of philosophical symposiums, but also of inter-religious meetings for dialogue, as it was the case with a congress which took place in St. Gabriel (Vienna) in 2008;<sup>1</sup> it dealt with questions, which for intercultural encounters, as well as for theological dialogues between Muslims and Christians, are of great importance. Reading and interpreting ancient religious texts that represent a specific claim has, in the context of current global developments and changes, proven to be a great challenge. This in turn, constantly also stirs up misunderstandings and conflicts. Several authors of the anthology have, in their contributions, committed themselves to this conflict and have referred to Gadamer's hermeneutics, in particular to his work *Wahrheit und Methode*, which was published 50 years ago and is amongst the most important philosophical contributions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Next to matters concerning art and aesthetics, law, history and philosophy, the topoi of theology are not in the least also an impetus for Gadamer, to reflect upon the understanding of and in language.

My meeting with you here in Iran is a good opportunity to build upon Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* and from it, gain a few impulses for the purpose of our discourse. For the purpose of our mutual dialogue, this book should be no more than an initial impetus – just as in the proverbial ladder in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, which one disposes of, once one has reached the top.<sup>2</sup> I would like to, based on my deliberations, point out (1) some of the hermeneutical implications, which might arise within intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, (2) important motives from Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*, which, for the most part, are usually discussed only in terms of “fusion of horizons”, and (3) from this, extract possible conclusions for intercultural and interreligious dialogues generally.

## The Hermeneutics of Dialogue

---

\* Lecture at the University of Religions and Denominations in Qom, Iran, Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010, and at the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies in Teheran, Iran, Nov. 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010. Translation: Rebecca Parker, Salzburg

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Andreas Bsteh, Seyed A. Mirdamadi (Ed.), *Hermeneutik. Thema der 4. Iranisch-Österreichischen Konferenz. Referate – Anfragen – Gesprächsbeiträge*. St. Gabriel vom 27. bis 30. Mai 2008, Mödling 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 6.54.

Dialogues, in today's world, which are characterized by complex relationships and diverse conflicts, are an indispensable requirement for communication and peace. Despite all efforts and many disappointments and setbacks, there is *no alternative* action to dialogue, other than that of violence. My esteemed philosophy professor at the University of Innsbruck, Otto Muck, unremittingly pointed out that dialogue, without "openness to the horizons of understanding", is not possible. Contrary to the common opinion, that dialogues exist in superficial harmony, he emphasizes:

Only when the area of communication has been broadened as much as possible, do the real differences in convictions, which cannot be traced back to a misunderstanding, emerge. A true dialogue is applied not to the concealment of contradictions, but to precisely the greatest possible understanding that the requirements for recognition of the real contradictions, and for fruitful discussion is present in them. The primary goal of the dialogue is, therefore, not self-justification or interrogation of the interlocutor, but rather the mutual understanding, through which recognition of contradictions and confrontation with them, without losing their strength in misunderstanding, is made possible.<sup>3</sup>

Especially for interreligious dialogues, which deal with the ultimate demands for truth and healing, this reference to the remaining differences of conviction and discrepancies of the interlocutor is important. Encounters, conversations, and discussions between people who represent different religious beliefs, do not present a strategy, for which, ultimately, there exists solely *one* conviction; rather they are a demanding challenge, which can potentially change people and help them to understand themselves, as well as others, better.

Two references, in this context, are important: first, we must be mindful of the fact that there are not only differences *between* the counterparts of a dialogue, but also *within* themselves. Neither "the Iranians", nor "the Austrians", neither "the Muslims", nor "the Christians" form a homogenous unity; within these, exist various groups and also differences of opinion, which prevent us from essentializing an identity. The Swiss philosopher, Elmar Holenstein, repeatedly pointed out that the internal differences are often greater than the external differences,<sup>4</sup> and stresses the fact that:

Cultures are of a complex, inconsistent nature. They are full of inner contradictions. Neither can they be completely parted from each other, nor can they share a simple, common denominator. The same ideologies, which in some cultures see the other as surpassing all other, are strangely enough

---

<sup>3</sup> Otto Muck, Sprachlogische Aspekte religiös-weltanschaulicher Dialoge, in: ders., Rationalität und Weltanschauung. Philosophische Untersuchungen. Hg. Winfried Löffler, Innsbruck 1999, 63-80; 72.

<sup>4</sup> „Intercultural variations are comparable to intracultural variations, and it is not rare that the first one are not bigger than the second one" (Elmar Holenstein, Zehn tentative Thesen, in: ders., Menschliches Selbstverständnis. Ichbewusstsein – Intersubjektive Verantwortung – Interkulturelle Verständigung [stw 534], Frankfurt 1985, 124-180; 149).

blind to the heterogeneity of their own culture. It is about time to get beyond simple dichotomies such as East and West, Christianity and Islam, Europe and China.<sup>5</sup>

Second, we cannot, as has become ever more obvious, engage in interreligious dialogue, without including those people, who live without religious faith. In other words: when religions engage in dialogue, they are in need of the secularists as a sort of third parameter. Insofar as every religion assumes it (and *only* it) can give definite answers to mankind's questions, by interacting with secularists, they learn that there are alternatives to this position and that people, who are not religious, create their lives in an ethically responsible way. This reality may irritate religious, since they believe that without specific reverence to God, Revelation, religious morality and Holy Scripture, the achievement of a good life is not possible. In any respect, the inclusion of the non-religious is, for interreligious dialogue, a chance and enrichment, in order to open the horizon for new perspectives and through this, learn that *no one* can give exclusive claim to humanity, rationality and freedom. That which is good for mankind, shows itself in dialogue with others, which in turn assists us in rediscovering forgotten, hidden, or repressed aspects of one's own (religious) traditions.

### ***Wahrheit und Methode* – An Aid to Understand Understanding**

In several contributions in the volume dedicated to hermeneutics, the tension between religious claims of validity and current mediation is addressed. While, since the time of Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), European tradition of hermeneutics has made no distinction between sacred and other texts – Ahmad Vaezi, in this context, specifically mentions Gadamer, as well –, religiously linked hermeneutics assumes “that a revealed and sacred text [...] regarding the process of comprehension and interpretation, involves particular requirements”<sup>6</sup>. To this day, the relationship of general and universal hermeneutics has not been satisfactorily resolved: Theologians accuse representatives of philosophical hermeneutics of not recognizing the specific context of religious life and understanding of religious traditions. Philosophers, on the other hand, view the theological approach to hermeneutics as an attempt to immunize texts, which support their own religious identity, from historical and philological criticism. Some suggest that “*philosophical* hermeneutics does not respect religion”. Others say that “*theological* hermeneutics does not respect reason”. Is it possible to resolve this contradiction, or are we consigned to an antagonism of philosophical criticism and religious conviction? After all, the social and religious context of Christianity in Europe has, for some time, been marked by a profound

<sup>5</sup> Elmar Holenstein, *China ist nicht ganz anders. Vier Essays in global vergleichender Kulturgeschichte*, Zürich 2009, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmad Vaezi, *Hermeneutische Erfordernisse heiliger Texte*, in: *Hermeneutik* (Anm. 1), 11-21; 12.

process of awareness and secularization. This process has altered the conditions (not the content!) of the theological dialogue and has made way for a different approach to hermeneutical questions, insofar as it occurs in a cultural and political context, which orients itself exclusively according to a religion's claim to truth, of which its "reader-orientation", based on the religion's texts on revelation, are intentionally subordinated to the "signification intended by God"<sup>7</sup>. In other words: in terms of the cultural disposition and the theological reflection of religious texts, we, in interreligious dialogues, are confronted with a *fundamental hermeneutic difference*. With precisely this challenge in mind, I would like to highlight three initiatives of Gadamer's hermeneutics,<sup>8</sup> which might help us to productively, respectfully, and sensibly avoid this difference.

### *The Openness to the Text*

In the second main section of his hermeneutics,<sup>9</sup> Gadamer presupposes the "openness for the opinion of another or of the text" (273) to be a prerequisite for a genuine understanding. Given the fact that many fail to listen to the text, or read something into it, Gadamer points out, "those willing to understand a text, are much more prepared to be told something by the text. For this reason, a hermeneutically trained consciousness for the *otherness* of the text must, from the beginning, be receptive" (ibid.). In order to achieve a successful understanding, it is, however, not necessary to take an attitude of "neutrality, or even complete withdrawal of one's own preconceptions, but rather a contrasting acquisition of one's own preconceptions and prejudice [...]. It is essential to be aware of one's own prejudice, in order that the text presents itself in its otherness, and with that, is allowed the possibility of playing its factual truth off of one's own preconception" (274). Here Gadamer's popular rehabilitation of prejudice take effect, through which – according to his conviction – a misguided rejection of tradition and authority, on the part of the Enlightenment, is corrected. *Prejudices* that become effective through the course of understanding traditional texts should not be eliminated, but rather *perceived*, as Gadamer emphasizes as he refers to Heidegger's explication of "Vorhabe", "Vorsicht" and "Vorgriff".<sup>10</sup> "It is, therefore, not a question of securing oneself against the tradition, which, from the text, raises its voice, but on the contrary, to distance one's self from what might prevent one from understanding it by its very nature. It is the unexposed prejudices whose domination makes us deaf to the matters addressed in tradition" (274). The openness towards the text is ultimately an attitude, which allows the *claim* stemming from the text, to voice

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Helmuth Vetter, *Philosophische Hermeneutik* (Reihe der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Phänomenologie, 13), Frankfurt 2007, 109-148.

<sup>9</sup> The original text in German is: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Gesammelte Werke, Band 1 [UTB 2115]), Tübingen 1999. – [First edition: Tübingen 1960].

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (GA 2), Frankfurt 1977 [Orig.: 1927], 200.

itself rather than to override that which a tradition wishes to express with a “general understanding”. A “recognition of the otherness of the other, which makes the same an object of objective knowledge”, says Gadamer, “would be a fundamental suspension of his or her claim” (309). This would mean the loss of openness that has, rightly so, been called for.

### *The Application of the Text*

Events involving interpretation and understanding, gained an importance within hermeneutics, which caused the application – the concrete referral of the texts in respect to today's reality – to be forgotten, or were understood merely as a subsequent “application” of a concrete situation. In contrast to this, Gadamer adverts to the constitutive importance of the application, and how, in an exemplary manner, it comes to play in both legal and theological hermeneutics. Understanding has always had to accomplish an achievement in application, as well as apply texts to the “hermeneutical situation, or rather the situation in which we find ourselves opposite to tradition” (307). Gadamer refers to Aristotle's deliberations on the relationship of theoretical and ethical knowledge, from which it is apparent, “that knowledge in general, which knows not how to apply itself in a concrete situation, remains senseless; indeed, the most concrete demands, which stem from a situation, are in danger of being obscured” (318). In comparison to the theoretical (επιστήμη) and the technical-artistic (τέχνη) knowledge, the ethical decision (φρόνησις) has the task of “seeking out the right from within a concrete situation; in other words, concretely discovering that which is right in the situation and capturing it” (322). The way in which ethical knowledge and decision making is carried out, therefore, becomes a “model for those problems found in hermeneutical tasks” (329). Those who wish to interpret texts, must also presume the conviction “that the application is not a subsequent and occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but rather a priori, and wholly determines it”; in order to understand the text, however, “one must not intend to desist from oneself, as well as the concrete hermeneutical situation, in which one finds oneself. One must apply the text to this situation, of one actually wishes to understand” (ibid.).

The lawyer, for instance, cannot desist from taking into consideration further legal effects, which he attempts to understand through their situation of origin (334). The same applies to a preacher: the proclamation cannot be detached from its consequences (336). Theological hermeneutics, as Gadamer says, “truly puts itself at risk; it presupposes that the word applies to the writing and that only the person concerned – believer or doubter – understands. In this respect, the application is the first” (338). The achievement of the application, which is executed in various scientific contexts, is, therefore, accordingly not just a subsequent application of a common case into an individual case, but rather “the real understanding of commonality itself, that the given text is meant for us. Understanding proves to be a way of impact and knows itself as such” (346). With this recovery of rele-

vance of the hermeneutical situation, Gadamer has, without a doubt, unmasked the artificial divide between theoretical knowledge and practical application, in terms of a self-contradiction of real understanding and, by means of important hermeneutical execution, has demonstrated that the observance of impact reception history, as well as the current possibilities of reception, do not imply a cheap adaptation, or even falsification of the texts, which are to be interpreted, but rather the realization of the claim, which they represent.

### *The Responsiveness of the Text*

Understanding a Text, contrary to the Romantic conception, would not mean, according to Gadamer, placing one's self in the emotional state of the author, in that the mission of hermeneutics "is not a mysterious communion of souls, but rather a participation in the common signification of the text" (297). The text poses a question to the person who interprets it. Indeed, it also proves to be an answer to a question, which must be regained. "To understand a text means to understand this question" (375). For this reason, the interpreter must return behind what has been said in the text, or rather, he must ask beyond the text. Hermeneutics is deeply determined by the "logic of question and answer" (376), which is why "the reconstruction of what the author actually had in mind, is a reduced task" (378). At one point in his analysis, Gadamer quite meaningfully explicates how he understands textual interpretation in terms of responsiveness, the ability of answer:

The reconstruction of the question, of which a given text is the answer, can naturally not be considered a mere achievement of historical methodology. Rather, at the beginning, stands the question, which the texts ask us, the concern for the word of tradition, so that the understanding of the same has always included the task of historical self-mediation of the present with tradition. Thus, the relationship of question and answer has, in truth, been reversed. The tradition that speaks to us – the text, the work, the trail – itself, asks a question, and with that, puts our opinion out into the open. In order to answer the question posed to us, we, the questioned, must ourselves begin to ask. We seek to reconstruct the question to which tradition would be the answer. However, we will not be able to do so without overstepping and questioning the historical horizon. The reconstruction of the question itself, to which the text is to be the answer, exists within questions, through which we seek the answer to the question posed to us by tradition. A reconstructed question can never be within its initial horizon. The historical horizon described in the reconstruction is not truly an enclosing horizon. Rather it is itself still enclosed by the horizon, which in turn, encloses us all as the questioners and as those affected by the word of tradition (379f.).

The challenge of understanding texts as answers to initial questions, does not aim at presenting already formulated question, which have already become tradition, but rather at regaining the initial execution of philosophy. This means: *asking*. "Understanding a

question means, asking the question" (381). Asking real questions, not repeatedly asking completed questions, is the business of hermeneutics: "Giving an answer in itself presupposes that the one asking the question has been obtained and called by the tradition" (383). The responsive dynamics of text interpretation, which Gadamer points out, demonstrates hermeneutics as a dialectical and communicative undertaking; not the preservation of answers, but the initiating of questions is quasi the engine of understanding.

### **"... to Put out into the Open". An Impetus for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue**

The *question*, according to Gadamer has "hermeneutic priority" (cf. 368); experience is not possible without actively asking questions. "Asking means to put something out into the open" (369). Partners in a dialogue experience themselves as being asked, challenged, and exposed – and they are given the opportunity of experiencing this conflict again and again as a learning experience that trusts the *other* interlocutor and presents fixed convictions as being questionable. This, as I mentioned earlier, applies especially to religious people, who, in dialogue with people of other or no religions, are given the chance of rediscovering the truth within their own faith. This is possible, as long as they do not discard the claim, which they encounter within *and* outside of their tradition. The impulses found in Gadamer's hermeneutics can, for the purpose of dialogue between Muslims and Christians in general have particular consequences, which I will, in the following, mention briefly:

- Gadamer's hermeneutics, which leads one to confront the otherness of the text and even put the current claim within the text by means of an alleged "neutrality" of understanding, allows the *strange* character of *one's own text* to become clear. Someone who is truly open to what tradition has to say will not only experience confirmation, but also irritation and questioning. Dealing with one's own tradition can then develop into a crisis, which, in the intimacy of what one is culturally and religiously accustomed to, perceives the "sting of the strange", but precisely in this way, is also able to come closer to the complex and outlandish truth of one's own convictions. "Openness" has become a common place word, which is also used in interreligious dialogues; however, whoever, indeed, takes this attitude, will be so affected by the claim of his own identity, that this claim itself shall become the question, the inquiry, and also the counter question. "Religion" then, is no longer a powerful identity, which creates self-understanding, but rather a questioning authority that challenges people and institutions to ask questions and constantly search anew.

- Gadamer's insistence on the application being an inner moment of understanding, as it would be understood in the practice of theological hermeneutics, considers the *reception* of texts, teachings, traditions, norms, etc. as a constitutive principle of hermeneutics. After all, religions have an interest in making sure that that, which is said and handed down via tradition is attained and accepted in the here and now, as well, and has "an effect". If the truth within a religion cannot be proven satisfactory in terms of practical actions, that religion becomes a context-free reality that constantly "arrives too late". A new attention to the reception and application of religious claims within one's own, as well as other traditions, could give the interreligious dialogue a deeper dimension, which assists both sides in perceiving the chances and crises of such application processes as a valuable field of learning (and not as a problem scenario).
- Gadamer's proposition, which suggests understanding texts as answers to certain questions – which I, in terms of an approach to a "phenomenology of the strange", understand as an explication of responsiveness<sup>11</sup> –, can strengthen theological hermeneutics in understanding religion as an *orientation in claims* and not as a confirmation of traditions. Not infrequently do religions, in the face of being questioned by heteroreligious or non-religious ways of life, find themselves in a position of demarcation and defense and refer back to positions, which they, in dialogue, purport as being "non-negotiable" and "unchangeable". A responsive and non-"dogmatic" understanding of one's own texts might help in going from insistence on certain answers to openness towards the crucial questions. This precisely means not giving up on one's own religion's claim to truth, but rather one's new "responsibility". Religious texts and positions are seen as moments of a questions-answer-dialectic, for which it is essential that these are further developed and not "finalized".

The Platonic dialogue, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer, owes itself to the "art of making stronger" (373); its maieutic productivity consists in questioning false securities and encouraging people to ask real questions. The deliberation of *Wahrheit und Methode*, in a certain sense, wish to become something of a "midwife" for dialogues, experiences, and knowledge. However, this is only possible, if we are of the opinion that we still have much to learn – from each other and from the people whom we encounter. "Asking means to put something out into the open" (369) – that is a chance and an experience that I, with all my heart, desire for all who are involved in dialogues.

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Antwortregister*, Frankfurt 1994, 320: „Responsiveness means that that, what makes answers to answering which in an unusual formulation can be called 'answerability'" (320).



*[Recebido em: agosto de 2012*

*Aceito em: abril de 2013]*