

SERIOUS CONVERSATION ?

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That quirky collection of items in *The Sydney Morning Herald* known as "Column 8" recently drew attention to the current usage of the word "conversation" in public affairs.¹ At the beginning of 2014, the Prime Minister of Australia used the word "conversation" with regard to the discussion of a referendum to be held concerning the inclusion of the indigenous people of Australia in our country's Constitution. The term "conversation" has also been used in connection with the ideas being proposed, both by the public, and by some politicians, as to how to deal with what appears to be the rise of alcohol fuelled violence in some areas of Sydney (and other parts of Australia).

But in the situations referred to above are we really talking about *serious* conversation, or is it more a matter of ideas being aired without much respect being shown for the value of disparate opinions or the people who hold them ? I believe that conversation can be more serious, and more valuable. So let's look at a couple of examples of conversations which go further than the simple floating of opposing ideas.

Conversation as a Theological Method

Doctoral Theses are more than the "quirky collection of items" in Column 8 mentioned above. Doctoral Theses are the result of much hard work by people who, by means of various types of research and examination, contribute to the advancement of thinking in a wide variety of areas, some of them religious and theological. In his Doctoral Thesis published in book form in 2013 under the title of *The Theological Notion of the Human Person - A Conversation between the Theology of Karl Rahner and the Philosophy of John Macmurray*,² Greg Brett CM³, uses "conversation" as a theological method to extend the understanding of the notion of what is meant by the concept of "person". The conversation referred to here does not take place physically between the German Theologian Karl Rahner and the Scottish Philosopher John Macmurray - in fact, they probably never met one another ! But it is their thinking and development of ideas that are brought together. Greg Brett puts it this way in his book:



In terms of methodology, the dialogue between Rahner and Macmurray presupposes an attitude of sympathy and openness between their respective positions. Thus, in a certain sense, it is conducted between them as equals. The goal of the conversation is not to critically evaluate one contributor in favour of

¹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney, Australia, Jan 4-5, 2013, "Column 8", p 16, first item.

² Brett, Gregory, *The Theological Notion of the Human Person - A Conversation between the Theology of Karl Rahner and the Philosophy of John Macmurray*, Peter Lang, Bern, Switzerland, 2013.

³ Image of Greg Brett is courtesy of [Yarra Theological Union](http://www.yarra.theologicalunion.org.au), Melbourne, Australia.

another. Rather, the purpose of the dialogue is to advance the theological subject by combining and extending points in common agreement, while investigating those points where there is divergence. Ultimately conversation offers mutual enrichment to both partners, and particularly to the theological task at hand.

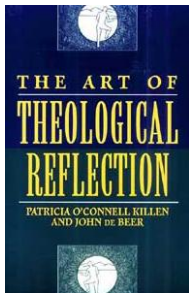
..... It allows the thought of Rahner and Macmurray to speak, as it were, in each other's presence, in order to recognise something of each in the other, despite their differences in background and discipline.⁴

By bringing the ideas of a German Theologian and a Scottish Philosopher together in conversation or dialogue, Greg Brett was able in his thesis to further the relational understanding of "person" in a way that is in accord with the thought of both Rahner and Macmurray but which goes beyond a mere synthesis of their thinking.

All of this comes from the use of serious conversation as a method of advancing theological insight.

Conversation as Theological Reflection

The mechanics of the Theological Method described above may be more familiar to us than we realise. We find a similar process in what is known as Theological Reflection - the process of exploring individual or group experience in dialogue with the wisdom of a religious heritage.⁵ In this process both the experience and the religious heritage are



considered as valuable and are allowed to "speak" to one another while an individual or group reflect on the meaning, agreement, disagreement, strengths and weaknesses that are shown to exist or be implied by particular experiences and religious heritage. The "dialogue" which takes place between experience and religious heritage by way of reflection (articulated verbally or not) is also referred to as a "conversation". The experience(s) reflected upon may be one's own, or the experience(s) of another, or of a group. The religious heritage reflected upon may be

Scriptural, Theological, Historical, Founders' Charisms, etc. and the reflection process can involve a variety of models. The process respects the integrity of both experience and religious heritage and may confirm, challenge, clarify or change our perception of both.

Theological Reflection is particularly effective as a tool of formation for those involved in pastoral ministry in the Church. The dialogue or conversation used is often engaged in without people being aware of the name given to the process.

⁴ Brett, pp 17-18.

⁵ O'Connell Killen, Patricia, and de Beer, John, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Cross Road, New York 1994, Introduction p viii . Image is taken from the front cover of this book.

Conversation taken seriously

When we look at the above two examples of use of "conversation", we find that the first element in each example is a focus on what might initially be seen as disparate poles. In the case of Theological Method it is the thinking of Karl Rahner and the thinking of John Macmurray. In the case of Theological Reflection it is the focus on experience and the focus on religious heritage. Both are treated as having their own value and therefore are worthy of respect.

The second common element in both examples is the bringing together of what are seemingly disparate poles by means of some form of dialogue - either articulated verbally, or at least reflected upon by individuals or groups, and treating both poles with respect no matter how disparate they might appear to be.

I would suggest that without this bringing together in open dialogue, with respect, that there is no serious conversation taking place.

And so, when the media highlight opposing opinions about an issue such as alcohol fuelled violence and proposed remedies, it is good that these situations be brought to our attention. But unless some real dialogue occurs in some way between those who hold the opinions, I find it hard to regard what is said as being a serious conversation. Likewise, when politicians announce opposing points of view on an issue, if there is no dialogue taking place then there is no serious conversation happening, and so results are limited. Oftentimes political point scoring is seen to be more important than any bipartisan approach that might move towards a resolution. Lack of recognising any value in another's opinion is not serious conversation.

The Church, at various levels, often fails to have any serious conversation about important issues where there is a divergence of opinion on beliefs, or in areas where religious heritage and current experience are at odds. Authorities sometimes hold consultations, or seek opinions, but often there is no real dialogue - just decisions made without serious conversation. Sometimes it happens that it becomes a question of just listening - and then saying no !⁶ Again, there is often no appreciation of any value in a differing opinion, and little respect for those who hold the opinions.

Conversation indeed has an important role to play in our Society and in our Church, but it needs to be taken seriously in order for that role to be effective.

⁶ Read Pongratz-Lippit, Christa, *C8's Cardinal Maradiaga castigates CDF Prefect*, News, The Tablet, January 25, 2014, accessed January 30, 2014 at: <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/363/0/c8-s-cardinal-maradiaga-castigates-cdf-prefect-he-s-german-so-he-thinks-in-black-and-white->

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When was the last time I had a serious conversation regarding my lived experience and my religious heritage ?
2. In my own Religious Community, what areas of my religious heritage would benefit from serious conversation involving differing opinions ?
3. Do we have sufficient respect for one another to see value in others' opinions ?