The French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas delivered a speech in 1947 entitled: “Beyond Dialogue.” At that time he felt that the term dialogue between persons of different faiths and convictions had become a compromised idea, akin to a feel-good word used by estranged groups that had no real intention of understanding one another. In 1947 Levinas was thinking about exchanges between Jews and Christians. However I think Levinas’ thinking applies well to the tradition of interfaith and intercultural dialogue, not only between persons of different faiths, but in our day with those who consider themselves humanists, atheists, and agnostic. He says when estranged groups go beyond superficial dialogue, their rivalrous relationship dissolves. Even more: true dialogue reveals what the rivalry covers up, a state of mutual need and responsibility. For him, authentic dialogue partners relate as healers of each other’s hurts and inadequacies. But fear and ignorance of each other makes us resist such vulnerability. The solution is simple: take the risk.

What We Tried to Do

The Xaverian Missionaries of the USA and the United Kingdom joined together with a dream project in mind: creating a safe and deferential space where religious believers and humanists could come together in friendship, dialogue respectfully with each other, listen and share in order to find some common ground and solidarity. We hoped it to be an opportunity for those who participated to bring this spirit of dialogue back to their own organizations, churches and mosques in order to find ways to do good together. Audaciously we hoped that people of all faiths and convictions could find common ground in our residence on this planet cherishing the values of justice, compassion, reconciliation and more. Going even further, the hope of this dialogue project was indeed to expose our need for each other, and our responsibility to each other. Perhaps too our own convictions and beliefs could be enriched and deepened, with an expanded view of humanity and the good we are called to do.

Why We Tried to Do This

Our commitment as Catholics to share our lives and the faith that we so deeply hold is done in dialogue in a very pluralistic and diverse world. We live shoulder to shoulder with people who not only consider themselves Catholic and Christian, but people of many faith traditions and those who hold no faith at all. Many do not believe God exists. We as Catholics are urged to find ways to understand this diverse human community through organized meetings and exchanges with humanists and atheists.

The second aspect that is important to keep in mind is that these exchanges and dialogues must focus on grassroots communities and not only among leaders of faiths and humanist organizations. If we are to have an impact on the culture we live, our exchanges must “involve the whole people of God.” In this sense it is important for ordinary Catholics in the pews to understand how we live our faith in communities where not all share the same faith or convictions, live in solidarity with peoples who do not reflect our own faith tradition, and pass
on our faith to our younger generation in this challenging environment. In a true sense, the younger generation needs help to navigate this pluralistic world through the eyes of their faith. It requires a great patience and wisdom, openness of heart, and an informed sense of our Catholic and Christian tradition, as well as a healthy sense of apostolic daring. Fundamentally, the impact of our faith in the cultures we live must be characterized by our desire to avoid “our sacral and secular isolation “from one another.iv

Our Communities are Both Religious and Secular

The place of religion in our societies has changed profoundly in the last few centuries. What these changes mean—of what, precisely, happens when a society in which it is virtually impossible not to believe in God becomes one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is only one human possibility among others. Charles Taylor, Canadian philosopher, in his book, A Secular Age, examines the development in "Western Christendom" of those aspects of modernity which we call secular. What he describes is in fact not a single, continuous transformation, but a series of new departures, in which earlier forms of religious life have been dissolved or destabilized and new ones have been created. As we see here, today's secular world is characterized not by an absence of religion—although in some societies’ religious belief and practice have markedly declined—but rather by the continuing multiplication of new options, religious, spiritual, and anti-religious, which individuals and groups seize on in order to make sense of their lives and give shape to their spiritual aspirations.v

Fr. Robert Schreiter, a theologian who teaches at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, spoke to religious leadership among men in the US recently on the challenges we face today in the task of the Catholic called the New Evangelization. He said that a narrative that held sway through much of the twentieth century was that the privatization of religion would result eventually in religion’s disappearance altogether. Today, however, it is generally accepted that the picture is more complex. First of all, societies become secular in very different kinds of ways. The most telling example is the difference between much of Europe and the United States. In Europe (especially in central and northern Europe) religion has dwindled in presence in societies. In an equally “secular” United States, however, religion continues to be a vigorous presence.vi

Fr. Schreiter adds that this has resulted in a discussion of a “post-secular” society. The term has come to have many meanings. In all instances, however, it does not mean that secularization is going to disappear. In fact, even thoughtful religionists would not want a number of very positive dimensions of secularity to go away, such as the emphasis on human rights, democracy, and an array of freedoms for the individual and for groups. What is most often meant by “post-secularity” is that religion will come to take its place in some manner alongside secularity. It will most likely not be the institutional presence that it held previously. There is recognition that, in many ways, secularity is a product of Christianity itself, and therefore as “relatives” the two need to find a way to live together.vii
The Impact of this Dialogue on our Churches and Organizations

One of the remarks that surfaced consistently in our Common Ground conference among humanists and religionists was that it seemed easier to find ways to dialogue among religious believers and humanists because we all believed this dialogue was important to undertake and came to the conference for that explicit purpose. This in fact was one aspect of “common ground” we all found. We all need to be in this dialogue relationship. That conviction that we all saw so apparent in our conference is in fact not shared at all with many of our colleagues, friends and fellow believers. In some ways, for theists and atheists, the necessity of this dialogue and collaboration is still new.

It seems that the concerns of the Catholic Church’s participation in this dialogue are little understood by Catholics, particularly among some bishops and clergy and those pastoral agents that work more closely with parishioners. Using the image of breathing in and out, this dialogue reaches out to our humanist and atheists brothers and sisters and the fruits of this dialogue are brought back into our churches and organizations where the very faith and human convictions we all represent become reasons to work together. The goal of this dialogue is inspire more people to be involved and create ever new opportunities of exchange and collaborative service, a proliferation of dialogue is what is required to break down the walls of intolerance and the lack of understanding between us.

The Pontifical Council for Culture of the Roman Catholic Church created a program, already underway in parts of Europe called Courtyard of the Gentiles through the direction of Benedict XVI. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Council says this: "We wish to broach a dialogue, maintaining ourselves sturdy in our territories, but respecting the identities. It is the place to search for common itineraries, without shortcuts or distractions or disturbances, in which listening becomes fundamental in spite of the differences." For Catholics, we have far to go and much to do to allow this concern of the Church to be internalized in the plans of the new evangelization in each and every diocese, particularly in Europe and the United States.

Where to From Here

Since the conclusion of our conference there has been further reflection and discussions that are spurring more opportunities for this kind of dialogue. There are new agreements for more of these collaborative exchanges between the Xaverian Missionaries of the United Kingdom through our Conforti Institute and the Interfaith Council of Scotland. Our Common Ground Twitter feed (https://twitter.com/secreldialogue) is alive with discussions on how humanists and religious participants are trying to keep this dialogue going through their own organizations. Those following our Common Ground blog (http://religious-secular-dialogue.blogspot.com/) allow us to share conference and post conference reflections for a wider audience.
The Xaverian Missionaries of the USA hope to hold a similar dialogue gathering somewhere in the United States in collaboration with the American Humanist Association and their local affiliations, as well as the broad spectrum of religious traditions that make our country so rich culturally. We are also charged with the publication of an e-journal that helps us share the fruits of our Common Ground conference with the hopes of encouraging more of these types of opportunities. We hope to have it published by the end of February 2014.

One of the first lasting impressions of this conference was this special gathering itself and the enthusiasm and hopeful expectation that all of the participants brought from their own life convictions and faith traditions. It was thought important that we are in this conversation in the first place. Each of the talks of our esteemed speakers from Scotland and the United States centered on why they thought we need to be having these kinds of discussions. This conviction was echoed in the dialogues of the participants throughout the weekend. Many felt it important to assuage the problems of misunderstanding that exist between us. Humanists and religionists use different languages to talk about the same things. We all have some universal concerns for the quality of life of humanity and the planet we all inhabit together but we are still convincing ourselves that we are all allies in these concerns. This dialogue should allow us to learn how to speak a new language together about the deep human solidarity that all of our convictions are propelling us toward.

Humanists at our conference were concerned about the overall religious influence in public policy that affects the lives of non-religious people. Catholics and humanists agree that there needs to be a separation of religious beliefs from politics, but this does not mean that religious faith has no place in the public sphere. Catholics, for example, find it important that the values of our faith are reflected in some way in public policy. Many humanists do not agree with this. At the same time, Catholics may feel contemporary politics interferes with the religious convictions of its citizens on occasion, raising the importance of religious freedom. The opposite is also true.

We Catholics and religious believers in general, must come to terms with the positive values of secularity that we all esteem and where we can find that delicate balance of honoring our pluralistic society and the freedom that both religious and humanists enjoy in a free democratic society. Secularism is the principle for the organization of a diverse, open society where people follow different religious and non-religious ways of life. It requires that the institutions we share (and jointly pay for in our taxes) should provide a neutral public square where we can all meet on equal terms. Both religious and non-religious voices need to be heard and heeded.

The purpose of this dialogue is not persuasion or conversion. Rather, it is an exercise in love and respect in order to create mutual understanding as a means toward collaborative service to our local communities and the world at large. Quoting the Interfaith Youth Corp in Chicago, “It is always better together.” Dialogue here is not merely a conversation about what we believe and do not believe, it is concerned first and foremost for the search of common ground by which humanists and religious believers can act with justice and compassion in a world often torn by
indifference, xenophobia and intolerance. In this instance, respect is not ordered to the beliefs each one of us has, but to the persons themselves, no matter what they believe. So dialogue between religious and non-religious people is all about behavior, not about our feelings about what we believe. It leads us to understand that amidst all of our differences we have important common convictions. This common ground is the basis by which we renew and strengthen the solidarity of humanity.

Finally I close with a thought from Pope Francis. In his recently published Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, he speaks of evangelization in a world that is pluralistic and diverse. In fact, today, thanks to the internet and the dynamics of globalization, we are actually hypersensitive to this diversity, if not somewhat dumbfounded by it. How do we face this diversity as people of faith? Francis speaks of a three way dialogue that the church must be engaged with. This dialogue includes our relationship with states and societies, culture and the sciences, and with those of other religious beliefs. Our dialogue with secularists and humanists is underlined by the Pope in this way: “As believers, we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness and beauty which we believe have their highest expression and source in God. We consider them as precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation.”

To achieve this we cannot by naïve about how this dialogue must occur if we are to take the words of the Holy Father seriously. It implies that in dialogue we find that all beliefs may not be acceptable, even if understood. Similarly, respect for other convictions and beliefs do not mean refraining from criticism. Rather, it means taking them seriously – and if I take something seriously, I engage it critically. The work of this dialogue and its promised fruits implies some type of critical engagement. It is an important sign of how much we esteem each other and to what lengths we are willing to go to unearth solidarity, despite our differences.

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1 Arnett, Ronald C., Beyond Dialogue: Levinas and otherwise than the I-Thou. John Benjamins Publishing Co., March 2012. This essay examines the interplay between dialogue and alterity, outlining Emmanuel Levinas’s unique contribution to the study and practice of human dialogue, whose differences with Martin Buber texture an enlarged sense of identity associated with the notion of dialogue.


3 John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio, 54

4 Benedict XVI


6 Schreiter, Robert. The New Evangelization as a Road to a New Catholicity. Talk given at the Conference of Major Superiors of Men on August 8, 2013 in Nashville, Tennessee.

7 Ibid

8 Pope Francis, The Joy of the Gospel, 250