

RESEARCH ARTICLE

RETHINKING METAPHORS FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: FROM BOUNDARY CROSSING TO NEGOTIATED SPACE (*vā*)

Melanie Barbato

Senior Lecturer of History of Christianity at Pasifika Communities University. melanie.barbato@pcu.ac.fj

Abstract

Interreligious dialogue is often conceived of in terms of intentional boundary crossing. While this metaphor captures part of the experience of interreligious dialogue, namely the movement from a well-known place into the space of another, the overreliance on this metaphor inscribes particular aspects of dialogue into discussions and sidelines others. This article seeks to rethink the spatial metaphors through which interreligious dialogue is conceptualised in the light of the Pasifika concept of *vā*—a relational space for encounter. Tevita Havea has, in his book chapter ‘New Ecumenism: A Negotiated Space’ (2023), used the concept of *vā* for thinking about ecumenism in terms that are free from the colonial language of empire. Similarly, this article seeks to think dialogue in terms other than discovery and exploration. While interreligious dialogue may or may not be seen as an extended ecumenism, similar relational issues are at work, and similar challenges of conceptualising encounter, similarity and difference.

Keywords

metaphor, space, boundary, interreligious dialogue, interfaith

Introduction

Interreligious dialogue can be defined as the conscious and respectful engagement with members of other religious communities *as* members of these communities.¹ ‘Boundary crossing’ is by far the most frequent metaphor that is used for the large variety of activities and communication forms that together make up the field of interreligious dialogue. When people in interreligious dialogue speak about boundary crossing, this is usually done in a positive light, as part of a respectful learning experience that can be gained by the movement from a well-known place into the space of another. Nevertheless, the overreliance on this one metaphor bears the risk of inscribing and overemphasising certain elements in how we think, describe and do interreligious dialogue, while remaining unaware of the limitations and risks of this particular imagery.

The aim of this article is to rethink the spatial and topographical metaphors for interreligious dialogue. In the first section I will discuss the dominance of spatial metaphors in interreligious dialogue, particularly boundary crossing. In the second section I will introduce the concept of relational space (*vā*), as it is adopted by Tevita Havea in his ‘New Ecumenism: A Negotiated Space’ (2023), and reflect on how this concept could also help us find a way of speaking about interreligious dialogue beyond the language of empire.

Bridges and Boundaries

A metaphor is not just a stylistic device that can make texts more interesting to read. Rather, the use of metaphors shapes the way in which we think about a subject (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Metaphors can help to make abstract concepts more concrete and accessible but they do so at the expense of creating connections with specific mental imagery. If a topic is typically discussed in the language of a certain metaphorical field, these metaphors come to determine what is considered normal, even if other ways of thinking about the topic or concept would be equally possible. Every metaphor foregrounds certain aspects and renders others invisible, which can make the overreliance on one particular metaphor problematic. Monika Kopytowska and Paul Anthony Chilton emphasised that ‘[r]eligious metaphor networks are not timeless unchanging structures’, and pointed instead to ‘the crucial role metaphorical reconceptualisation can play in the historical transformation of systems of belief and organisation’ (Chilton and Kopytowska 2018, 168). This means that

1 ‘Interreligious Dialogue’ is here taken to constitute different formats of deliberate and formal or semi-formal interreligious communication and engagement, interreligious diplomacy and interreligious art initiatives, and is not restricted to the bi- or multilateral verbal exchange. The term is often also taken to include the everyday non-deliberate ‘dialogue of life’, i.e., people of different communities interacting without thinking of doing dialogue. While I do not typically see this as part of interreligious dialogue, my criticism of the overuse of the boundary crossing metaphor would apply here, too, and the exact delineations are not the focus of this article.

if we want to improve the practice and study of interreligious dialogue, it is worthwhile to reflect on the use of language, and specifically metaphor, in dialogue contexts.

Bonnie Howe, has in a book chapter on metaphors of interreligious dialogue and interdisciplinary research, highlighted the strong presence of the spatial metaphor. She asks: 'Are we Boundary Crossers and Bridge Builders?' (Howe 2018, 120). If one goes by the titles of works on interreligious dialogue, this is certainly how many academics and practitioners approach the topic. An interview book with Cardinal Arinze has the title, *Building Bridges: Interreligious Dialogue on the Path to World Peace* (Cardinal Arinze 2004). Another example is Francis X. Clooney's pioneering work, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Clooney 2010). Christoffer H. Grundmann edited a volume, *Interreligious Dialogue: An Anthology of Voices Bridging Cultural and Religious Divides* (Grundmann 2015). In the same year, Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof published an edited volume, *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations* (Moyaert and Geldhof 2015). The language about boundaries and transgressions may be particularly suitable for the negotiations for ritual participation, where entering a holy space usually reserved for certain groups might be perceived by some members of these communities indeed as a boundary violation. But, as the examples indicate, verbal dialogue, too, is perceived as a process of boundary negotiation, maybe as an extension of such sensitive interreligious encounters: boundaries that have to be acknowledged, respected, bridged, or transgressed.

The interaction with the boundary of both one's own and the other's tradition is so foundational to the way that people speak about interreligious dialogue that it could be called a 'dead' metaphor, so commonplace that it is hardly registered as a figurative way of speaking (Seligman and Weller 2019, 79). It might therefore be helpful to consider for a moment what kind of topography this metaphor implies. It is a landscape of religious belonging, marked by religious and cultural divides, which is otherwise unspecified. These divides may be imaged as borders, similar to the lines on a map that mark the territory of a nation state. As such, they clearly and unambiguously demarcate the dominion of one religion or cultural group from the other. Or, alternatively, the divides can be imagined not as dark lines but as three-dimensional faults or abysses that cut deeply into the landscape. This is where the language of building bridges comes into play, because a bridge makes sense only in a terrain with faults or rivers that otherwise cannot be crossed. Within that mental imagery, those engaged in interreligious dialogue travel through the country and intentionally cross the borders, much like travellers or explorers, or like pioneer-engineers build bridges across faults so that they and others can cross over safely into new lands. The boundary and the bridge metaphor are thus two sides of the same coin, as the act of

connecting presupposes division: a border that is crossed is still a border; a fault over which a bridge is built is still a fault.

The border crossing metaphor captures some important elements of interreligious dialogue. Engaging in interreligious dialogue means in some way leaving one's religious comfort zone. It is a journey of learning and a venturing into the unknown, of leaving behind, if only temporarily, the familiarity of one's own community to understand the thoughts and practices of another community, maybe even to walk a mile in their shoes. Dialogue has the goal of establishing communicative routes that are acceptable and comfortable to both sides, and that invite respectful future encounters, hence the image of the bridge, that helps to cross what otherwise might be an abyss of prejudice. As these considerations show, not only does talking about spatiality and movement within a landscape make sense in interreligious dialogue, it is indeed difficult to speak about interreligious dialogue without using metaphors of topography and space. And yet, the ubiquity of the boundary metaphor in interreligious dialogue makes us forget that spatiality does not have to be about boundary crossing. In his influential work, *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Land*, Ilaitia Tuwere has succinctly remarked: 'A Fijian does not think of himself as belonging within certain frontiers but as originating from the place where the founder-ancestor landed and after which the land was named' (Tuwere 2002, 49). This means land does not have to be viewed naturally as segmented space with boundaries that are to be crossed but can equally be conceptualised as relational space, with the human being tied to the land through kinship lineage and oral traditions of naming, speaking, and remembering.

Paths and Pilgrimages

In 2007, Cardinal Tauran, at the time president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, chose the title, 'Determined to Walk the Path of Dialogue' for his yearly message to the Hindus on the occasion of Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. In this text, the path of dialogue can be envisaged as a journey of at least two people from two different traditions. It is about journeying together, in a landscape that is otherwise unspecified. The 'path of dialogue' does not suggest a landscape of religious boundaries with a Christian and a Hindu territory. As indeed in most of these religious greeting messages, the 'other' that is viewed with some suspicion is not the other religious community, but people who oppose dialogue efforts, regardless of their religious affiliation (Barbato 2020, 363). The metaphor of the 'path of dialogue' brings up a mental imagery of travelling together, Hindu and Christian, on the journey of life, or human collaboration, or maybe even on the journey towards God. Walking together is a much-loved metaphor of Pope Francis (for example

Francis 2023) and, in this particular Diwali message, it is used as part of a call to keep collaborating and to keep building friendships, even in the face of challenges from both outside and within the respective traditions.

The path of dialogue may not always be a stroll in a lovely garden. It may at times indeed be quite a strenuous or at least longwinded interfaith pilgrimage, as, for example, Lynne Price's book title, *Interfaith Encounter and Dialogue: A Methodist Pilgrimage* suggests (Price 1991). However, both walking together in a garden and the parish pilgrimage are communal and relational events involving both oneself and the other as agents. The boundary crossing metaphor, on the other hand, is very much based in a wider field of exploration and pioneering: a person or expedition setting out to travel, crossing boundaries, making first contact, and establishing the necessary infrastructure for sustained engagement. In this imagery, there is no presupposed mutuality. The learning process may lie predominantly in the courage required for setting out, crossing the boundaries, the risk and adventure of the movements in unfamiliar territory, and challenges of establishing contact and communicating with the 'natives' in their land, before returning with stories to tell back home. None of these activities need to be done with hostile or disrespectful intentions, but they sound, for an activity that is about intercultural engagement, uncomfortably close to visions of discovery and empire.

Mapmaking and the 'Centre'

The metaphor of interreligious dialogue as boundary crossing entails a form of mental map-making. We are invited to make sense of the activities of interreligious dialogue by imagining a topographical landscape of territories, faults, borders, and bridges, which has to be traversed. The connection between geography and power, particularly empire, has been analysed in different academic disciplines, most specifically critical geopolitics (Toal 1996; Cox, Low, and Robinson 2008). Land surveying was an essential part of the colonial enterprise, and maps and borders were often made by the powerful for the powerful, and without the people who may be most affected. As Giselle Byrnes showed for the case of New Zealand, colonisation by land surveying went beyond the merely physical, and included also the visual, textual, and conceptual (Byrnes 2015). Already in 1995, Ilana Friedrich Silber discussed the rise of spatial metaphors in sociological theory (Friedrich Silber 1995). Vebjørn L. Horsfjord more recently studied spatial metaphors in the Common World Muslim-Christian dialogue process (Horsfjord 2016). Katherine Pratt Ewing pointed out specifically for the border-crossing metaphor that it is 'a manifestation of the discourse of nation-states' (Ewing 1998, 266), which often fails to adequately capture identity negotiation and shifting processes, in her case for the study of Muslim identities.

The spatial metaphor of boundary crossing implies the notion of a starting point, from which one sets out to explore and cross borders. While everyone has a homeland, too often in colonial history the homeland and starting point of the explorer became absolutised. The starting point, or one's own country and culture, is then understood as the centre, the normal, from where one travels into the periphery, possibly even the barbaric, uncivilised ends of the world. For example, while from the view point of the Portuguese, it made sense to say that they 'discovered' America, this makes no sense from the perspective of the indigenous population, yet for a long time the language of 'discovery' was used uncritically as if it was a universal descriptor. More recently, the language of discovery has met a significant push back, as the Eurocentric normative assumptions are rejected in favour of more balanced or multi-focal ways of telling history (Miller, Ruru and Behrendt 2010). The language of boundary crossing can unintentionally replicate pattern of centre and periphery or normal and inferior. This deserves attention, in particular, as interreligious dialogue is still predominantly Christian-initiated, and sometimes shows a lack of reciprocity or even willingness to participate unless Christians are given the central place or 'lead role', as Peniel Rajkumar observed with reference to Heup Young Kim's concept of 'the will to host' (2021, 694)

In my own experience, participants in interreligious dialogue respond well when I tell them that for me, interreligious dialogue is not only about crossing boundaries but also about respecting boundaries. Behind that may often lie a relief that I will not oversimplify religious difference to support a narrative that all religions are or want the same. Nevertheless, the boundary, here protective rather than nation state, should only be one metaphor for dialogue among others, and other metaphors should be sought specifically to balance the boundary metaphor's imperial connotations and lack of relationality. The Pasifika concept of *vā* can be helpful in this regard.

Relational Space (*Vā*) in Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is not the same as ecumenism, but it may be seen as a wider ecumenism that extends from the plurality of the Christian churches to the plurality of all faith communities (Moyaert 2013, 196). Even those who do not share such an understanding of the relationship between ecumenism and interreligious dialogue can agree that, in both ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, similar relational issues are at work, and similar challenges of conceptualising encounter, similarity and difference have to be negotiated.

Gladson Jathanna questioned the typical language of Christian unity that is used to speak about ecumenism because of its proximity to the colonial language of empire, pointing out that in Roman times, the term '*oikoumene*' was used to refer to the Roman

empire, that is, the extension of Roman political reach to the ends of the known world (Jathanna 2020, 4f). This colonial meaning of *oikoumene*, Jathanna argues, is ‘mirrored in the Western colonial conversion projects and also in the modern ecumenical movements’ (Jathanna 2020, 6). Before this background, it becomes imperative to look for metaphors for ecumenism that do not reinforce connotations of conquest and colonisation.

One such alternative is offered by Tevita Havea in his article, ‘New Ecumenism: A Negotiated Space’, with the Pasifika concept of *vā*. *Vā* describes a relational space between two or more people. Havea introduces *vā* by quoting from an unpublished paper ‘The negotiated space’ (2008) by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Maui Hudson, Murray Hemi, Sarah-Jane Tiakiwai, Marcia Dunn and others, who describe negotiated space as ‘the in-between terrain where distinctive worldviews and knowledge bases enter into some form or engagement or relationship to potentially be expanded and innovated’ (Tuhiwai Smith et al. 2008, 6; Havea 2023, 86). Negotiated space, according to them, is a “space that relates” between people, a “sociospatial” way of conceiving of relationships’ and ‘a terrain of intersection where both communalities and differences can be explored and understood’.²

Vā, a space for relating, can thus be seen as an alternative or complementary topographical metaphor to the mental terrain of the boundary crossing metaphor. Interreligious dialogue, read through the concept of *vā*, would not be a landscape of faults and bridges, nor a territory for conquest, but rather a space filled by encounter, exchange, looking at each other, speaking, sending cues and signals, maybe also stepping forwards and back. Unlike the path of dialogue, the people in the negotiated space may be imagined not as walking side by side but facing each other. *Vā*, in comparison to the path of dialogue, is less directional, and more relational. As Martyn Reynolds has emphasised, within the Tongan and Samoan context, *vā* can be seen as an expansive concept that stretches beyond individuals to the cosmos, where relatedness is the basic structure of life and the kind and degree of relatedness is potentially open (Reynolds 2016). This implies also the need for appropriate relationships, which may place different requirements on intradenominational, ecumenical and interreligious engagement. I’uogafa Tuagalu pointed out that, for the Samoan context, *vā* is about social structure but it also has psychological and spiritual underpinnings, and these cannot be isolated from each other as Samoans ‘tend to define themselves in terms of their sacred obligations to family and community’ (2008, 115).

Two aspects are often forgotten in discussions of *vā*: aesthetics, that is, the connection to beauty or harmony, and time, that is, that *vā* is not only about space but about relational space/time (Ka’ili 2017, 34). Havea emphasises the temporal element of *vā*, as relationality includes not only the right spatial relationship but also the right

2 Havea 2023, 86 quoting from Tuhiwai Smith et al. 2008, 6.

temporal connection: when to engage with whom and how. One important element is the conscious disengagement of human activity from the land, to let the land rest and recover for future agricultural use. As Havea points out, *vā* can be both a space of interface and a space of separation. This is not an internal contradiction but shows that *vā* is, as Havea agrees with Tuhiwai Smith and others, about negotiation processes in ‘balance, reciprocity and respect’.³

A negotiated space sometimes needs engagement, sometimes disengagement, in both temporal and spatial terms. While dialogue partners tend to appreciate my statement that dialogue is both about crossing and respecting boundaries, the concept of *vā* more accurately expresses what should be going on in respectful dialogue: the temporal and spatial frame for encounter is maintained at all times but the actual relational action may at times be one of engagement and at other times one of disengagement, as required by the situation. Interreligious dialogue will not always be about talking; it can also be about holding the space of friendship while letting the other be, allowing them to recover their identity after potentially unsettling processes. In contrast to the connotations of pioneering and empire that come with the rather forceful boundary crossing metaphor, the notion of *vā* is more gentle and responsive but also more intense in terms of the relational focus on each other, in that it either means intentional engagement or intentional disengagement to allow later re-engagement, but with a constant relationship-focus and not merely project- or process-focus. As Upolu Lumā Vaai has pointed out, ‘[b]alance is not about equating and twinning things but about differences and contradictions falling into place in their aligned relations in order to offer life and wellbeing’ (Vaai 2024, 39).

The space of *vā* is more fluid than the space implied in the boundary crossing metaphor, where the territory is already marked by dark lines or deep faults. *Vā* implies a negotiation process of relational give and take, which can be slow and cyclical, and extend beyond mere human-to-human interaction. Havea draws on examples of indigenous conservation practices as a negotiated space between people and plant-life. The *vā* is not there independent of the people; rather it is set by the people, but not the people as independent agents but always people in relation. This relationality extends beyond the people that are involved, to include the surroundings, animal and plant lives, into a cosmological dimension (Havea 2023, 86). In this view, ultimately everything is interrelated with everything. *Vā* is not an anthropocentric concept, but one that places the individual in relations to other individuals, other communities, other life forms and ultimately the whole cosmos. Havea writes: ‘[N]egotiated spaces are about the rebalancing of the ecological web of the household, so that the natural world can regenerate enough to sustain the household’s needs’ (Havea 2023, 90). Even when apparently nothing happens,

3 Havea 2023, 86 quoting from Tuhiwai Smith et al., 6.

these spaces are not without processes but work in different time frames. They do not serve the purpose of quick extraction and capitalist expectations but the building of equitable long-term relationships on all levels. This is why the concept of *vā* is chosen by Havea for an ecumenism that serves the Pasifika household of God—a vision of Christianity that extends to other communities and all of creation. A similar point about human and non-human interconnectedness is made by Luke Bretherton in the context of political theology and the call for an intentional formation of a common life:

As creatures, situated in various covenantal relations ... we are always already in relationship with others. Our personhood is the fruit of a social and wider ecological womb as much as a single physical one; that is, we come to be in and through others not like us, including non-human others. This means we cannot exist without some kind of common life with a plurality of human and non-human ways of being alive. (Bretherton 2019, 22)

In interreligious dialogue, the focus on long-term relationships cannot be over-emphasised. Religious actors are of interest to diplomacy as multipliers in times of conflict, but interreligious relations are no immediate response solution. They require years of trust and relationship building and work best when they have become part of a society's fabric, not introduced as part of a crisis resolution programme. Despite increasing attempts to determine and study factors for the evaluation of dialogue programmes (Abu-Nimer and Nelson 2021; Driessen 2020; United States Institute of Peace 2004), the success of interreligious initiatives remains difficult to measure because the healing and networking processes are often slow and almost impossible to single out. Introducing factors for making dialogue success measurable and quantifiable can do more harm than good, because once a quantitative approach has been adopted, the fostering of a relational space is likely to be substituted for a focus on procedures and reporting mechanisms. In the light of such functionalist approaches, Pasquale Ferrara has called for a change in perspective: for diplomats not to ask how interreligious dialogue can serve diplomacy, but how diplomacy can serve interreligious dialogue (Ferrara 2022). The idea behind this is that dialogue processes are valuable in themselves and need to be fostered long-term, continuously and without performative pressure, so that they can bear fruit when interreligious cooperation and intervention become necessary.

***Vā* and Common Ground**

Vā may be distinguished from another spatial metaphor, that of the common ground. The metaphor of the common ground as a shared space for dialogue is a key idea of the

Common Word document, which Muslim leaders addressed to a Christian audience. As Vejbjørn Horsfjord pointed out, in the Common Word process, the common ground is presented as ‘*given* rather than constructed’, as the second paragraph speaks of a basis for peace that already exists (Horsfjord 2018, 232). The metaphor of the common ground presents sameness or at least close proximity as the ideal (Horsfjord 2018, 234), proposing an ontology of two religions overlapping in their expressions of truth. Horsfjord agrees with Marianne Moyaert that the common ground can become ‘the blindspot of interreligious dialogue’ (Horsfjord 2018, 233).

While both common ground and *vā* imply a relational space, common ground implies the (possibly premature) assumption of similarity or identity, while *vā* is a negotiated space of difference and exchange, where harmony is not assumed as a given but sought through relational processes. Common ground can be seen as a safe starting point, but in interreligious dialogue sometimes the common ground may turn out to be rather shaky, as religious traditions are complex and few positions tend to be uncontested. For example, Muslims often call the Christian religion a fellow religion of the book but some Christians reject this description; for Christians, God has revealed himself primarily in Jesus, that is a person, not a book. Positing the existence of a common ground can be a way of initiating a positive interreligious conversation, especially where levels of trust are low. However, where there is an opportunity for open discussion, the exploration of difference can be more fruitful than the observation of things one has in common. The danger of the common ground metaphor is that it can be static, by framing similarity as positive and beyond questioning, as it is taken literally as the ground on which dialogue is built. Common ground shares with the boundary metaphor the mental image of religious territories, however, with the assumption of a significant extent of overlap when it comes to values in particular. The concept of *vā* is more dynamic as the space is envisaged not as a given basis, but as a living space that develops through relationality.

While common ground might appear as something that should not be questioned, negotiated space implies ongoing care and recalibration. Michael Lialiga has used *vā* in his discussion of a Samoan model of conflict resolution and prevention. He explains that in Samoa, the self is only thought of in relation to the community, especially other family members, and the space or gap that exists between them (Lialiga 2022, 222). The self as an isolated and bounded entity or ‘individual’ is not part of the cultural vocabulary (Lialiga 2022, 222). *Vā* is therefore not a mere sphere of overlap, as the common ground suggests, but a sphere of relationality. Samoan culture recognises that every action affects more than just the agent, meaning other people but also the whole world around them, animate and inanimate. What is important, according to this outlook, is not the maintenance of the individual’s boundary or autonomy, but the maintenance of the

appropriate space between those in relations, be they chief and the village, brother and sister, or human being and God. According to the Samoan philosophy, honouring the *vā* is a way of conflict prevention, because conflicts occur when sacred space and relationality between people or between humans and all other elements of the cosmos, have been violated (Ligaliga 2022, 225). In line with these considerations, good interreligious dialogue can be envisaged as honouring and maintaining a sacred space between people of different religions that reduces conflict, establishes long-term relationships and aids a deeper and organically integrated understanding of our differences and similarities.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the concept of relational space (*vā*), which Tevita Havea has used for rethinking ecumenism, can also offer a way of thinking about interreligious dialogue that is free from the language of empire. The predominant metaphor of boundary crossing shows an uncomfortable proximity to imperialist or at least individualistic language of venturing into foreign territory for making (first) contact. The metaphor of the relational space, on the other hand, is about mutual engagement in a shared space, and about relationships, not isolated agency. *Vā* can be a helpful concept for ecumenism in the Pasifika household of God, which is no longer just about Christian or even human flourishing but about the necessarily interconnected flourishing of all of God's creation. Similarly, *vā* can help to rethink the mental territory of interreligious dialogue.

Language about interreligious dialogue strongly relies on spatial language: boundaries and bridges, paths and pilgrimages, common ground, and, at least as connotations, territory, nation state, empire, centre, and periphery. While the boundary crossing metaphor is about decisive action and fearlessly pressing forward, the alternative or complementary metaphor of the relational space is more about intentional engaging and intentional disengaging. In the imagery of *vā*, the religious person does not possess a religious territory into which the initiator of the dialogue can cross. Rather, both or all parties form the negotiated space together in a cosmological network of interconnection. While boundary crossing has almost become a dead metaphor, the concept of *vā* can bring new life to the reflection on how religious people interact with each other and the world that surrounds them.

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