



CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATION

A NEW WAY OF LEARNING

Anindita N. Balslev



CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATION

This book proposes a radical shift in the way the world thinks about itself by highlighting the significance of Cross-Cultural Conversations. Moving beyond conventional boundaries, it examines the language in which histories are written; analyzes how scientific technology is changing the idea of identity; and highlights the need for a larger identity across nationality, race, religion, gender, ethnicity and class. It asks for a concerted effort to engage each other in open conversational forums on a range of contemporary global issues, alter our attitudes toward self and the other, and unlearn prejudices that perpetuate the practice of divisive identities.

The book also explores critical themes such as political actions, solidarity-in-diversity, clash of social identities, tensions between nationalism and globalism, the quest for global peace and authentic meeting of world religions. Further, it discusses the evolving connection between science and religion, focusing on key philosophical ideas that have permeated the Indian cultural soil.

The book will be of great interest to scholars and researchers of philosophy, religious studies, science and technology studies, and cultural studies.

Anindita N. Balslev is an independent philosopher based in India and Denmark. Her research and teaching experience span India, France, the US and Denmark. She is a founding member of the International Society for Science and Religion, and is on the board of the journals *World Affairs* and *Zygon*. She earlier served on the board of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS/DOSER). She has been awarded a scholarship by the government of France, two fellowships from Denmark and recently the Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship in New Delhi. She received her postgraduate degree from Calcutta University and PhD from the University of Paris.

Apart from many papers in professional journals, she is the author of *A Study of Time in Indian Philosophy* (1983; 2019), *Cultural Otherness: Correspondence with Richard Rorty* (2000), *The Enigma of I-Consciousness* (2013) and *Reflections on Indian Thought: Fourteen Essays: On Indian Philosophical Themes* (2019). She has organized several important CCC international conferences and is the editor of *Cross-Cultural Conversation: Initiation* (1996), *Toward Greater Human Solidarity* (2005), *On India: Self Image and Counter Image* (2013) and *On World Religions: Diversity, Not Dissension* (2014), and the co-editor of *Religion and Time* (1993) and *Compassion in the Religions of the World* (2009).



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATION

A New Way of Learning

Anindita N. Balslev

First published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa
business*

© 2020 Anindita N. Balslev



The right of Anindita N. Balslev to be identified as author of this work
has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced
or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other
means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and
recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without
permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks
or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and
explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-17298-5 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-429-31642-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions.
[*Āno bhadrāḥ kratavo yantu viśvataḥ.*]

– Ṛgveda



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

for EVA and OLAV



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
Why this book?	1
On the idea of CCC	6
1 Cross-Cultural Conversation as a new way of learning	13
2 Cultural diversity and the quest for a larger identity in our time	25
3 Creative tensions between nationalism and globalism	47
4 Living in a multireligious world in an age of science	79
A Religious identity and religious diversity	84
B Science-religion “saṃvāda” and the Indian cultural heritage	100
5 Imagining soft boundaries	116
<i>Index</i>	135

FOREWORD

Extraordinary developments in science and technology are bringing within our consciousness fascinating details ranging all the way from tiny sub-nuclear particles to the vast cosmos around us. Despite this explosion of knowledge, humanity is still mired in extensive conflict zones. Whether it is the continuing threat of nuclear annihilation, the battle against fundamentalist forces, or severe tensions between countries in the same region, the threat of massive destruction and devastation continues to hang over our consciousness. Added to this is the overwhelming threat posed by global warming that can be traced directly to human activity over the last two centuries. The rapid melting of the glaciers resulting in a rise in sea levels that will, over the next few decades, wipe out several island states, the massive extinction of thousands of species of mammals, birds, fish and insects, and the increasing incidence of erratic and lethal climatic events surely constitute an existential threat to the human race.

In this context Cross-Cultural Conversation takes on immense urgency and significance. It is true that cross-cultural interactions have taken place ever since human history began, but they flowed from colonialism or national domination, always accompanied by violence and war. In this day and age what we need are structured cross-cultural interactions between and within nation-states, and between individual scholars and intellectuals from around the world. That is the only way in which we can help to preserve our sanity in a world that seems to be spinning out of control, as well as counteract the growing global tendency toward polarization, ultimately leading to conflict.

It is in this whole background that Dr. Anindita N. Balslev's work in the field of Cross-Cultural Conversation over several decades assumes significance. For several years she has organized these conversations in India, which have been attended by eminent intellectuals from India and abroad. I might particularly mention the seminar organized by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in 2013, coinciding with the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda, which she conceptualized. This was inaugurated in Rashtrapati Bhavan by the then president of India Shri Pranab Mukherjee, and the subsequent public dialogue conducted by Anindita N. Balslev

included His Holiness the Dalai Lama, MPho Tutu, Archbishop Tutu's daughter, the eminent Muslim scholar Shri Wahiduddin Khan and myself. These transactions have been published under the title *On World Religions: Diversity, Not Dissension* (2014), edited by Anindita N. Balslev. Interestingly, the four of us represented four major religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, and the way the seminar was conducted could be a model for future attempts to organize inter-religious meetings. I myself have been involved for several decades in the interfaith movement, having met with the remarkable American Juliet Hollister, who founded the Temple of Understanding in 1960. I went on to become international chairman of this organization and have now set up a parallel Temple of Understanding India Foundation (TOUIF), which undertakes a series of interfaith events usually in co-operation with other like-minded institutions.

The interfaith movement is an important factor in the Cross-Cultural Conversation because, as is all too obvious, inter-religious and intra-religious conflicts continue to present a grave threat to world peace. The movement can be said to have begun in 1893 when the first Congress of World Religions was held in Chicago. Swami Vivekananda's riveting speeches made a tremendous impact and continue to resonate down to the present day. He launched a frontal attack on religious fanaticism and said the following words:

If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world, it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written in spite of resistance: "Help and not fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension."¹

Religion is only one of the multiple identities that we inevitably possess, whether it is nationality, race, caste, language, social or economic status or any other. Melding these multiple identities into an integrated consciousness is tremendously important, and Cross-Cultural Conversations can be of great assistance in this process. If multiple identities are integrated around a strong spiritual center they can in fact be a source of great inspiration and power. On the other hand, if there is no such integration, these identities are often in conflict with each other, which results in unbalanced and often paranoid behavior. With increasing urbanization, traditional psychological and sociological roots are weakening. It therefore becomes urgent that a creative dialogue between the authentic traditions associated with the principal

religions of the world should take place. A parallel exercise has to be the science/religion dialogue, which with the latest developments in physics, cosmology and psychology, is becoming increasingly fascinating. These and other areas have been well covered by the author in this book.

Toward the end of the last century, it seemed that the sheer impact of technology was gradually leading us toward a global society, in the first instance by strengthening regional groupings, such as the European Union, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS). However, in the last couple of decades we are facing an anti-globalist backlash. Brexit has seriously shaken the European Union, while SAARC seems to have gone into hibernation. The Trump presidency has destabilized many well-established international treaties, and has also withdrawn from the historic Paris Agreement on Global Warming. At the same time there has been a resurgence of aggressive nationalism, which has thrown up strong autocratic leaders in many important countries. As a result of this the momentum toward a global society has weakened, making the Cross-Cultural Conversation even more urgent.

I had the privilege of being India's representative on the UNESCO Governing Board for eight years, during which I came into close contact with this great organization. Despite lack of adequate resources, UNESCO remains the only international organization that is committed to building the bulwarks of peace in the minds of men and women. The only UNESCO Grade I institute in Asia is the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEPS), which I have chaired since its inception. Here we concentrate on cross-cultural dialogue with the youth. Several programs, like Talking Across Generations, Youth Against Violent Extremism and Youth for Peace, have resulted in several meaningful inter-generational dialogues. This is important, because while dialogues between senior scholars are essential, it is equally important to engage the younger generations in this exercise. Indeed, the future will depend to a large extent on our capacity to motivate the younger generations toward peace and sustainability. We find that around the world young people are tragically being drawn into violence and extremist ideology. Cross-Cultural and Cross-Generational Conversation can be a great help in this context.

Personally, despite all the negative factors that we see around us, I retain the hope that in the final analysis better sense will prevail. There are two scenarios for the future of the human race. The European philosopher Arthur Koestler held that the human race was programmed for self-destruction because of an engineering defect in the human cortex, whereby the thinking and the feeling elements are not adequately integrated. As a result, though we know what should be done, most often we do not do it, which will ultimately lead to disaster, and this is certainly happening as far as the environment

FOREWORD

is concerned. As against this, there is the scenario expounded by the great philosopher Sri Aurobindo. In his view Man is not the end product of evolution. He is, in fact, a work in progress and the human race is programmed ultimately to evolve into a higher level of consciousness whereby alone the challenges that we face can be finally solved. The jury is still out in this matter, but in my view whatever the final result we must retain a positive outlook, which alone can collectively counterbalance all the negativities that we see around us.

When she applied to the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund for the prestigious annual Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship to enable her to sum up the work that she has done in this field, the Selection Committee readily accepted her request. This book has flowed from the fellowship and will be of interest to a wide spectrum of intellectual audiences around the world, including sociologists, political scientists and scholars in the field of the humanities and social sciences. Dr. Anindita N. Balslev's elucidation of the theory and practice of Cross-Cultural Conversation is a positive contribution, and I commend her for her work in this significant field.

Note

- 1 Swami Vivekananda. *Speech at the First Parliament of World Religions* (Chicago, 1893).

I don't think there's much point in bemoaning the state of the world unless there's some way you can think of to improve it. Otherwise, don't bother writing a book; go and find a tropical island and lie in the sun.

– Peter Singer

CCC is proposed as a new way of *learning* about the dynamics of “the self and the other” as much as for effectively *unlearning* those prejudices that are handed down uncritically from generation to generation with regard to the “otherness” of others.

– ANB

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My involvement with the project that I designate as Cross-Cultural Conversation (CCC) is not merely academic. Apart from my years of studies, teaching and research in India, France, Denmark and the US, the sheer life experience of the past decades of shuttling back and forth between the two hemispheres, including some places outside of the periphery of India and the West, has opened up vistas before my mind that have been spectacular in more ways than what I can describe.

Particularly significant for me was that in the course of my reflections, based on my formal studies as well as face-to-face encounters with people from various walks of life, I gradually became aware of how social realities are created and sustained by culturally construed “boundaries” that eventually cease to be simply metaphorical.

Indeed, to look at a range of ground realities that influence human interactions and exchanges in the global scene is not much unlike watching a map of Africa, where one sees how those artificially drawn straight lines divide that huge continent into numerous countries simply by carving the natural landscape without any regard for the troubles and problems these actually cause in the sociopolitical spheres of human interrelationships. I could not help noticing that the social world is one where much of human suffering could be reduced if we only knew how to “cross,” if not efface, some of those “hard” boundaries that incessantly invent divisions between “us and them.” I thought that if we could, instead, learn to recognize borders not as barriers and appreciate these as markers of distinctions and of diversity whether that might help to alter the social landscape and I wondered whether it is possible to help achieve such a change with the help of that marvelous tool of articulation that humans are fortunate to possess, by engaging in Cross-Cultural Conversation?

Although this is not the space to attempt an autobiographical essay, I must admit that I have been singularly fortunate that the most significant persons of my life – be they as closest members of my family, my teachers, a few of my colleagues, students and friends or even strangers in a few accidental