One of the most remarkable cultural developments over the past half-century has been the growth of inter-religious dialogue. Members of religious communities that had, on principle, long avoided courteous communication with each other are now in regular discussion characterized by mutual respect, and the discussions not infrequently involve precisely the points of theological difference that had so long precluded dialogue. These conversations are, of course, symptomatic of a new understanding of religious identity characteristic of modernity, at least in democratic lands. But they have also played a major role in bringing that new relationship into existence and strengthening it, as the participating bodies have spread the new insights and revised images to their membership through liturgical reform, preaching, and teaching.

Inter-religious dialogue, needless to say, is not without inner tensions. The most important of these concerns the very goal of the enterprise. Given the history of religiously inspired animosity and contempt to be overcome if dialogue is to develop and continue—a history that includes unspeakable acts of violence from some parties—it is tempting to adopt a model of conflict resolution or diplomatic negotiation as the basis for the conversations. The goal in this case would be to come to agreement, rather in the manner of two countries seeking to bury the hatchet or of a couple going into marriage counseling in hopes of replacing a contentious relationship with one characterized by empathy and mutual support. When this is the model, the
commonalities will be stressed and the differences minimized, neglected, or denied altogether. For the latter are correctly seen as sources of division, and division is then viewed as dangerous. Transposed into the world of religion, Rodney King’s plea, “Can’t we all just get along?” can thus (at least in the minds of the less subtle or the less theologically committed) quickly become “Aren’t we all just saying the same thing?”

When the answer is affirmative, the dialogue may seem to have reached its goal, but the expense is deceptively great, so great that the whole enterprise is, in fact, imperiled. For dialogue on these terms quickly turns into a monologue, as each side simply phrases in its distinctive idiom what is, in fact, the common belief of all involved. Religious difference, once a matter of the deepest beliefs about the most important and universal truths, is thus rapidly downgraded to a matter of mere vocabulary. In this way, conflicting truths can all be held to be valid, only for different communities, so that everybody is right, no mutual critique is possible, and good relations will obtain—at the expense, of course, of the theological core of each community. This assumption is rarely articulated, to be sure, but it does underlie the practice of inter-faith dialogue in more than a few instances.

Fortunately, there is an alternative to this self-defeating model based on conflict resolution or diplomatic negotiation. The alternative, too, seeks good relations and requires each community to confront its misunderstandings of the other and the often-grievous results that these have had. At the same time, however, it also insists on the importance of the theological core of each tradition and requires both dialogue partners to reckon with the full import of the other’s theology, even when it not only contradicts but also critiques one’s own. In this model, in other words, the differences, no less than the commonalities, must be brought to the fore, for without them the full truth of the individual religious traditions and the relationship

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The theory of dialogue to which I adhere is laid out excellently in Leora Batnitzky, “Dialogue as Judgment, Not Mutual Affirmation: A New Look at Franz Rosenzweig’s Dialogical Philosophy,” in *Journal of Religion* 79 (1999), pp. 523–544, esp. 537–540. Contrary to what she suggests, however, I do not adhere to the position that “it is best not to engage in dialogue on theological issues” (p. 540). My view, rather, is that we deeply compromise such dialogue when we make reconciliation or mutual affirmation its objective.