

Plato, Aristotle, and the conditions for interfaith dialogue

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One of the basic problems for religious dialogue concerns the question of how to assess and evaluate the claims of the different religious traditions and even how to ensure that the terms being used in the discussion are understood in the same way by all the discussants. In the Middle Ages, this was not taken to be much of a problem. The working assumption was that the psychic faculties common to all humans made it possible that the perception of the world was more or less equivalent the world over. Furthermore, it was considered self-evident that the conclusions of a debate concerning the feasibility of a given article of faith would elicit natural assent, provided only that the debate proceeded according to the established rules of valid and binding argumentation. Though Aristotle had warned in the *Topics* and the *Sophistical Refutations* that stubborn debaters might hold onto their original theses against all evidence and argument to the contrary, this should be perceived as a sign of human weakness, not as a mark of the weakness of the argumentative procedure itself.

In this presentation I examine the ancient roots of the medieval practice of writing pieces of interreligious dialogue. It turns out that the rather rigid Aristotelian model of debate is somewhat attenuated when one considers the Platonic two-level model of reality with which many of the medieval thinkers worked. If we start from the assumption that human language only inadequately describes divine reality, the question concerning the conditions for valid dialogue will also be seen in a new light.