Introduction
Why don't Christians do dialogue?

Simon Goldhill

Dialogue is a banner word of contemporary politics, religion and culture.

Politicians claim that they wish to have a dialogue and to listen, and demand that opposed parties open dialogue; interfaith dialogue is held up as the answer to the racial and religious tensions that scar modern urban living; art forms are said to enter into dialogue (with society, with their audience, with artistic principles). At one level, it is no surprise that communities that privilege the term democracy will also demand dialogue. From the invention of democracy in fifth-century Athens, dialogue has been central to the political theory and practice of democracy: it is only after hearing both sides of the question and allowing different views to be expressed, that a vote can properly be held. Dialogue is endemic to democracy, though, as we will see, this is not simply a blithely benign claim: with dialogue comes also a recognition of the necessity of dissent, persuasion (spin) and the repression of minority views. The privileging of dialogue spreads to broader cultural issues, so that it would be extremely hard for any serious religious figure in the West to reject dialogue as a form of doing business. It would be to open oneself to the charge of totalitarianism (or worse). In the intellectual arena, Bakhtin has also made 'the dialogic' a buzz word. It is associated with anti-authoritarian exploration, playfulness and challenge. The dialogic has consequently been taken up as a positive term in a range of disciplines.

All of this makes dialogue a key term in the modern West. But it does not make it an understood term, nor is it an idea that has been treated to an adequate history. This book aims to look seriously at the development of the idea of dialogue in the ancient world, as a way of exploring the deep background of the term and as a way of exploring what the main issues and implications of it are for modern thinking. *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity* looks at the genre of the written dialogue and its relation to social forms of exchange. This enquiry is conducted within the polemical context of suggesting that, with the coming of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire, a sea-change occurred in the use of dialogue, and this

establishes a crucial template for understanding why dialogue matters so much. The opening term of the book's title, 'The End', is designed to invoke both the *purpose* and the *demise* of ancient dialogue as a literary form and a social privilege. The title of this introduction, 'Why Don't Christians Do Dialogue?', is to put most provocatively one possible history of the genre and practice of dialogue. And the task both of the introduction and of the essays in this volume is to provide the nuance – or the argued disagreement – to make such provocation productive.

There are three crucial frames for the following chapters. The first concerns the history of the literary genre of dialogue. There is a prima facie plausibility to the claim that dialogue as a literary form is integrally related to its genesis in the fifth- and fourth-century BCE culture of democratic Athens. The exchange of staged debate as a form of discourse is privileged in any version of democratic theory. The assembly as the key political institution of the state is predicated on the assumption that different views must be laid open to public scrutiny if the best decision about action is to be reached. This is matched by the law court – and equality before the law is a principle of democracy – where opposed positions are articulated before a jury of citizens. The theatre, another invention of democracy, stages dialogue as a form of civic practical reasoning. When the historian Thucydides writes what is known as the Melian Dialogue – where the speeches of the ambassadors from Melos and the Athenian negotiators are represented as if they are a drama script, without comment or analysis from the historian – he appears to be representing the political exchanges of a specific moment in a specific institution of democracy. History writing cannot ever fully hide its mediation, but here, more vividly than in even the most dramatic historical narrative, the historian seems to hide behind the appearance of the unmediated report of an actual dialogue, dialogue as the motive force of democratic negotiation, dialogue placed at the centre of democratic power.

What is more, the connection between dialogue and democracy has been set at the forefront of some of the most exciting contemporary work on Athenian culture. Geoffrey Lloyd famously made democratic dialogue one of the conditions of possibility for the Greek enlightenment in his *Revolutions of Wisdom*.[1] For Lloyd, the historical, political conditions of democratic dialogue encouraged the development of self-conscious reflection – second-order questions, a metadiscursive expectation – which took medicine (which every society knows) towards the theory of medicine, and politics (which

[1] Lloyd (1987).

every society knows) towards political theory. And it is the drive towards theory above all that distinguishes, for Lloyd, the Greek enlightenment. Similarly, Josiah Ober's investigation of the political rhetoric of the classical city, one of the great bodies of evidence for democratic ideology, repeatedly emphasises the importance of the dialogue between the elite and the masses in the institutions of the city, where speech-making and speech-evaluating were basic to democratic practice.[2] In a similar light, contemporary attempts to understand the social role of Athenian theatre, which have followed on from the ground-breaking work of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, have stressed not merely that drama stages dialogue, but also that theatre is a medium for introducing dialogue into social values: to open cherished values to the questioning of multiple understandings, multiple opinions.[3] From all these points of view, not only do dialogue and democracy have an absolutely integral link, but the literary forms prevalent in democracy reflect this powerfully.

Because of this critical understanding of the inherent link between democracy and dialogue, it is immediately fascinating that the single figure most evidently associated with the invention of the literary form of the dialogue, Plato, should be someone deeply opposed to democracy as a political system, and that Plato's teacher and star of so many of his dialogues, Socrates, should be someone executed by democracy, executed indeed at least partly because of how he did dialogue. At one level, it would be easy to say that Plato's dialogues reflect the dialogues Socrates held around the city: chatting in the gym, the symposium, the market-place. But Plato also develops the most extended theoretical expression of how discursive forms affect the nature of argument; develops the most extended critique of democracy, not least for allowing the wrong people a determinative voice; and develops the most thorough-going analysis of the role of public speech as a political force in the state. The genre of dialogue comes into being fully formed with a self-reflective, highly sophisticated, brilliantly articulated and performed consideration of its own nature as genre and as practice. A good deal of modern philosophical debate on Plato is motivated precisely by the tension in Platonic writing between the drive towards ideal, normative, authoritative knowledge and the slipperiness and playfulness of dialogue as a means of expression.[4]

[2] Ober (1989). See also Hesk (2000).
[3] Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988); see also, for example, Goldhill (1986); Halperin, Winkler and Zeitlin (1990).
[4] See Griswold (1988); Morgan (2000); Nightingale (1995); Vlastos (1991); and Long in this volume (with further bibliography).

The first three essays in this volume look at the genesis of the literary form of the dialogue in the classical city of Athens, and each is concerned to move away from over-simplified models which assert that dialogue is by definition democratic, open and easily explained as a historical phenomenon. Together, they interrogate the relationship between Plato's writing and other contemporary writing, and show both how many different explanations of the dialogue form there are already in Plato himself, and how complex the recognition of dialogue as a form can be. This provides a necessary hesitation at the start of the project. It is regrettably common in comparative endeavours to assume that there is a clear and simple beginning from which complexity and sophistication is derived. ('In Greece/ Homer/archaic period … but in modern days/now/ in Rome/Britain things are much more complex …') There is no uncomplicated origin for the dialogue as genre; it is always already a conflicted, self-conscious and multiple form.

The history of the genre goes on, of course. Hellenistic culture continued to develop the dialogue form. It was associated not only with philosophy, from its privileged Platonic beginnings, but also with the symposium (and the importance of Plato's *Symposium* creates a philosophical and intellectual genealogy to complement the social role of sympotic performance).[5] The symposium was a fundamental aspect of Greek self-definition, a cultural ritual through which the values of the group were enacted, displayed, discussed. Sympotic dialogues, as a literary form, asked questions about how to behave at a symposium, about the knowledge of the group, about cultural identity. Reading (and writing) sympotic dialogues offers a reflective version of the construction of this cultural identity, as attending the symposium was a performance of a citizen's cultural identity. Sympotic literature, especially when the Roman Empire becomes the dominant political force in the Mediterranean, is heavily invested in projecting and promoting a sense of the long past of Greek culture as formative for the contemporary citizen. The dialogue, despite any expectations of spontaneity or casualness, is profoundly aware of its own history. From Plutarch to Athenaeus to Macrobius, however, this literature has rarely attracted modern critical attention or praise. This dismissiveness is now changing, as the significance of the genre for understanding Greek culture in the Roman Empire is being re-evaluated.[6]

[5] See Henderson (2000); Hunter (2004).
[6] See Konig in this volume, with bibliography; Braund and Wilkins (2000) is paradigmatic of the attempt to recoup an undervalued sympotic text; see also Preston (2001).

Roman culture for its part adopted the dialogue form especially after it had conquered Greece itself. Just as Roman comedy closely translates and adapts Greek dramatic models, particularly Menander, so Cicero rewrites Greek philosophy in a Roman form in his dialogues. What we see in Roman dialogue is a doubled vision: dialogue is also a way of negotiating a space between cultures and traditions, a way of expressing Roman intellectual life in and against Greek models. Cicero has often been denigrated as failing to live up to the great model of Plato – heavy-handed, literal, formal, undramatic, as opposed to elegant, ironic, vivid. The essays in Part II of this book look at the role of the sympotic and Ciceronian philosophical dialogue in later Greek and Latin, and finds not only an important and underappreciated intellectual openness in Cicero, but also a significant cultural and intellectual role for sympotic dialogues within the normative structures of society. This interest in the connection between the literary dialogue and cultural forms of exchange will be picked up later in this book.

Early Christianity, however, appears to have little time for dialogue. Augustine, although he did write some short dialogues early in his career, explicitly rejects the form for serious theological thinking, and all his major works are in treatise form, even when there are obvious antecedents in Platonic or Ciceronian prose.[7] The dialogue is only very rarely evidenced as a form for normative Christian writing, despite the strategic place of conversion and theological discussion in Christian communities. The catechism and other question-and-answer structures are not in any significant sense a dialogue: they are forms of exchange to aid controlled learning and to produce certain, fixed responses. (Nor, in general, is there Christian drama, until at least much later.) The exceptions to this general case tend to support it rather than to construct a counter-case. The second-century Syrian Christian Methodius writes a *Symposium*, where a group of virgins 'discuss' the benefits of virginity: it is clearly modelled on Plato as well as the sympotic tradition and aims to replace the Platonic image of desire with a Christian repression of desire. But in the piece, each virgin gives a set speech, and they end by singing hymns together: it is a dialogue without conversation. It inevitably – and proudly – lacks the dangerous thrill of a drunken Alcibiades crashing into the party, flute girl on each arm, to relate his failed attempt to seduce Socrates.

Many a saint's life ends with a martyrdom, where the saint gets to deliver a brilliant rejoinder to his/her torturer. This looks back to the long tradition of philosophical *chreiai* (the *bon mots* of the wise): it is a conversation in that

[7] See Clark in this volume.

the saint delivers a put-down to a pagan. But there is never space for an extended dialogue in the martyr text. When there is a longer dialogue between a Christian and an opponent, as in Justin Martyr's 'Dialogue with Trypho', the opponent is canon fodder for the Christian's rhetoric: as Paula Fredriksen puts it, 'talking *at* Trypho' would be a more apt title.[8] The dialogue between competing forces within a soul (*Psychomachia*) allows for mutually exclusive and opposing positions to be expressed; but they are within one person's inner life, and rarely allow evil the attractive threat it is likely to pose in less controlled social circumstances. It is telling to compare, say, Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, from the very end of the fourth century, with the internal debate staged by the character Callirhoe in Chariton's first-century novel *Chaireas and Callirhoe*. Callirhoe imagines a debate between herself, her absent husband and her unborn baby about whether she should allow the baby to live: each gets to make a rhetorical speech, and each gets a vote (II. 11). The husband and child vote for life – so by a majority vote Callirhoe decides to let her baby live. This is internal debate modelled as political institution – a witty, sophisticated and yet moving image of a young woman's doubts and fears in which competing claims create a dialogue in her mind. Prudentius writes a long, narrative poem, which centres on an imagined battle between virtues and vices, where each virtue gets to deliver a speech, like a Homeric warrior on the battlefield, upholding Christian values, before vanquishing the enemy. On the rare occasions when any vice gets a word in, it is only to lament impending and inevitable defeat. It is more like an extended model of the martyr's put-down to his enemies than an exchange. There is no uncertainty, the only questions are rhetorical, and the dominant model is the battlefield boast – where good can only defeat evil, not exchange views.

Mark the Hermit, writing from within the fifth-century monastic community, is paradigmatic of this view of Christian resistance to dialogue. His *Against the Lawyer* does dramatise a dialogue between a monk and a lawyer, which justifies the monk's rounds of prayer and fasting over and against a more worldly existence. 'If you were a philosopher', says the lawyer, 'I would have no qualms; but as it is …' (The philosopher might be expected to hold extreme views on deprivation, and, in a dialogue, the turn towards philosophy, however sniffy, is generically motivated as well as marking the agonistic competition between different authoritative discourses for control over a man's soul.) The intense and powerfully argumentative monk duly forces the lawyer to beat a retreat. But the manuscript at this

[8] See Fredriksen (1999).

point falls into question-and-answer format, like a catechistic text. A young monk, worried by his senior's rhetorical flair and by his perhaps precarious hold on the truth and nothing but the truth, asks a sharp question. He is described, fascinatingly, as 'thinking of himself as suffering unjustly, like a martyr'. Being like a martyr is clearly not what is wanted in the monastic community: after his brilliant rhetorical display, the senior monk rubs home a point about humility and lowliness. He demands that the junior monk lie prone on the floor and ask his question from there. Mark the Hermit certainly draws on the forms of dialogue: exchange of view, debate, multiple positions. But it is a text aimed at reinforcing and indeed demanding a strict hierarchical world picture, a single truth, and the physical suppression of any sign of the uppity. This is a dialogue where answering back is not a real possibility.

The dialogue in this way seems to lose much of its generic force. An ideal democracy (if such an imaginary being is not inimical to democracy in itself) would still demand difference of opinion. Would an ideal Christian community find difference of opinion unwelcome or even dangerous? Although Socrates provides one model for Christian asceticism and commitment to belief, the Trappist monk (say) is as far from Socrates chatting on the street as you can get.

This image of Christianity moving towards hierarchy, with a commitment to certainty and the repression of difference ('heresy') as it increases its power as the religion of Empire, is not attractive to most modern Christians. The third and fourth parts of this book take a close look at it. The third part looks in detail at Augustine, as a major and exemplary figure of the fourth- and fifth-century Church. While recognising Augustine's resistance to certain types of dialogue, and to certain assumptions that modern supporters of the value of dialogue would care to make, this part aims to provide a more sensitive account of Augustine's position as a bishop in the Church's power structures and a recognition of the role of letters in the scattered Christian communities. It still leaves us with an image of an authoritarian Augustine, but it sets his authority in a context that makes it more comprehensible. The fourth part looks at the social place of dialogue and dialogue forms in Christian communities. It finds that there are more demonstrations of genuine exchange, and more possibilities of debate, than the strong model outlined above would seem to allow. One answer to the question of why Christians didn't do dialogue is to note that actually they did: in some later texts, and in different institutional structures, debate and the generous, sincere and engaged exchange of views could also be found. Whether this is enough to dislodge the model of increasing resistance

to dialogue in the name of orthodoxy's resistance to heresy remains to be seen.

The Talmud, however, which develops orally and is written down in around the sixth century CE, is full of dialogues – every Mishnaic pronouncement is followed by discussion, often between named rabbis, of the questions, problems and implications raised by it. For some modern critics, the Talmud demonstrates a truly dialogic spirit – a polyvalence and playfulness to set against the drive towards orthodoxy's certainties.[9] Like all monotheistic religions, Judaism certainly has its extreme statements of principle and its acts of violent exclusion. Yet, it has been argued, the Jewish texts are always qualified by the regularly vertiginous dialogue of conflicting opinion in the Talmud. Should the Talmud be set against Christianity's orthodoxy as a counter-model of interpretative practice? The final section of the book considers the role of Jewish thinking on reciprocal exchange, and the normative force of the Talmud as a dialogic text. The Talmud and Christian normative theological writings develop alongside one another, with different strategies of recognition and mis-recognition of each other. It is important to consider what the differences are between Jewish and Christian writing in terms of dialogue, and, most importantly, how these differences may affect the structures of power, authority and normative value. Is dialogue only possible for the marginal? Can dialogue change the authoritarian commitments of monotheistic religion?

What this brief account of dialogue as a genre reveals immediately is that there is always more involved than discrete issues of literary history. We are also repeatedly taken up with how such literary history relates to structures of authority, power, and institutionalised religion and politics. This is the first book, we believe, to have explored this long history of dialogue, and to have looked in particular at its relative absence in Christianity. What is it about the expression of conversation in the form of dialogue that makes it integral to democracy and difficult for early Christianity? The first aim of this project is to provide a foundation to explore these questions – and we hope to stimulate further work in these and later periods.

This relation between a history of a genre and the political and social history of the ancient world provides, then, the first frame for the essays that follow. The second and third frames emerge from what has already been said, and each can be expressed more briefly. Bakhtin, despite the obscurity in which he lived his life, now that his writings have been translated (first into French and then English), has become a major intellectual figure in the

[9] Instrumental in this view was Handelman (1982); see also Boyarin (1990).

West; and it would be impossible to write about dialogue in an informed way without engaging with his thought. This is not the place for a full exposition of Bakhtin's work, which has been very well treated by modern scholarship – including its relation to ancient texts, which play such an important role for his view of the past.[10] For classicists, Bakhtin's use of terms such as 'novel' and 'epic' can be frustrating, since they rarely relate closely to contemporary understanding of the ancient use of the terms as generic markers or as literary form. The same is true of dialogue. Bakhtin rarely writes with any detailed attention on ancient dialogues, for all that he privileges ancient history and the term dialogue. Plato is barely discussed in *The Dialogic Imagination*, and the history of dialogue as a form passes unmentioned. From Bakhtin, 'the dialogic' has entered contemporary discourse as a term to encapsulate the subversive, anti-authoritarian potential of language to undercut the claim to univocality typical of totalitarian government and of orthodoxy as a principle. 'The dialogic' expresses the ludic power that is released when multiple viewpoints inter-react. Yet it is quite unclear how dialogic Bakhtin found ancient dialogue.

It was Karl Popper who most influentially outed Plato as a theorist for the great totalitarian systems of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union.[11] For Popper, Plato's political thought emerges as an enemy of the open society, as he termed it, and as an enemy of Socrates himself, his teacher. For Popper, Plato constantly fights against what Bakhtin would recognise as the dialogic. Yet Plato's texts remain a more vexing test-case for Bakhtin and for the politics of reading than Popper allows. The *Republic* and the *Laws* can appear as handbooks for the closed society, and have been taken as such by governments in practice as well as by political theorists. But Socrates' irony, subversiveness and challenge to normative authority are known primarily through Plato's representation. How can the representation of the ironic and subversive Socrates, the playfulness or instability of dialogue form, and the idealist and authoritarian views of Plato all be brought together? How do ancient dialogues relate to Bakhtin's idea of the dialogic? Or to put the question in its most general form: To what degree can dialogues escape their own dialogic potential?

Each essay in this volume is concerned with issues of openness of meaning, of authority and playfulness, of the relation between texts and social forms. As such the volume makes a contribution to thinking through the relationship between Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic and the genre of

[10] From a huge bibliography, see especially Holquist (1990); Emerson (1997); Möllendorf (1995).
[11] See Popper (1945); also Lane (2001).

ancient dialogue, and the broadest questions about authority and writing that such a problematic evokes.

This leads on to the third frame of reference. We intend that this book will contribute energetically to an ongoing debate about authority and difference, and, more specifically, about religious authority and dissent. The historiography in this book is not teleological (despite the title of the volume). Its hazard is that one of the best ways to understand the religious discourse of early Christianity and Judaism is to approach it through the form and practice of dialogue, and, in turn, one of the best ways to understand what is at stake in the ancient tradition of dialogue is to approach it from the perspective of how religious writers later appropriated, resisted and manipulated the form. Its historiography is in this sense comparativist (and the range of topics covered, along with the structure of the book, is designed to help this comparative strategy). The sense of historical change in the treatment of dialogue is necessarily framed by evident intellectual continuities between the classical city and the Christian Empire – the role of Neo-Platonism in Christianity, and, more generally, the dual resistance to and adoption of ancient philosophical methods and questions in Jewish and Christian writings; the role of rhetoric; the role of education through Homer and other classical sources. And also by the equally evident social continuities – both Christian and Jewish communities are formed within Greco-Roman culture, and the deep influences of these dominant social structures are strongly marked in ritual, liturgy and in patterns and expectations of behaviour. (Christians and Jews were not always as different from pagans as all sides colluded in believing.) But the problems that dialogue raises for the Church and for the Rabbis – about authority, about the place of certainty and doubt, about control and freedom of expression – have not gone away, and indeed may seem as pressing in the twenty-first century as ever before. A naive if potent image contrasts the freedom of expression and the value of dialogue in the democratic, Christian West to the fundamentalist control of expression, demand for conformity and aggressive suppression of dissent in the Islamic, dictatorial East. There is a palpable need to find a more sophisticated, engaging and participatory way to talk about religious authority, the political process and consent. In a small way, we hope that this book may show some paths forward towards at least having a more thorough historical understanding of one of the central terms in any such discussion, namely, dialogue.

The essays in this volume are each new and were commissioned for it. A colloquium was held in Cambridge, England, in 2006 where first drafts of the chapters by Ford, Long, Lim, Boyarin, Schwartz, Konig and Clark were