

The Key to Effective Religious Dialogue

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Interreligious dialogue consists of "discussions for mutual understanding held among differing religious bodies."¹ This vague definition does not, however, provide the guidelines within which formal interreligious dialogue should be held. How can Christians dialogue with members of other religions without compromising their beliefs and lapsing into syncretism, while at the same time being respectful toward non-Christians?

One of the foundational documents in interreligious dialogue is Leonard Swidler's "The Dialogue Decalogue."² Swidler provides ten "commandments" for engaging in constructive interreligious dialogue. These commandments are (to paraphrase):

1. The purpose of dialogue is to increase understanding.
2. Participants should engage in both interfaith and interreligious dialogue.
3. Participants should be honest and sincere.
4. Participants should assume that other participants are equally honest and sincere.
5. Each participant should be allowed self-definition.
6. There should be no preconceptions as to areas of disagreement.
7. Dialogue can only occur between equals.
8. Dialogue can only occur where there is mutual trust.
9. Participants must be self-critical of their religious traditions.
10. Participants must attempt to experience how the traditions of others affect them holistically.

Swidler's decalogue has three general categories: 1) who should participate, 2) what participants should expect from the dialogue, and 3) how the dialogue should be conducted. Evangelical Christians may profitably examine these categories to see how they can participate in interreligious dialogue.

Who Should Participate?

Swidler is explicit: dialogue should only occur between equals (or, as the document on ecumenical dialogue from Vatican II says, *par cum par*³). On the surface, this means simply that the participants should be equal in authority or position within their religious communities (and, when possible, equals in education). A dialogue between a leader of one religious group, and a recent convert to another, would not be a true dialogue; the recent convert would likely be unable to facilitate a nuanced discussion.

Paul Griffiths states that the participants should be the "representative intellectuals" of a religious community who "typically engage, among other things, in the formulation and defense of sentences expressing doctrines of the community."⁴ These intellectuals must have, to quote Vatican II, "Equality in sacred and secular learning and equality in the level of responsibilities held."⁵

One area in which the participants should have an equal education is in regards to the religion(s) with whom they are dialoging. Each participant should be knowledgeable about the beliefs and practices of the other religious community. For example, each participant may hold a doctorate in

an area of religious studies; however, the dialogue will be unequal if only one participant is knowledgeable about the other's religion.

Swidler's belief that there should be mutual trust between participants indicates the necessity for the participants to be known by the others. This does not mean that the participants must be close friends. Rather, it emphasizes the importance of participation by representative intellectuals. The scholarship of intellectuals will be known and available for review by other intellectuals, allowing all participants to develop respect and trust for each other before beginning the dialogue. The ability to review the scholarship of participants will also ensure that all motives for dialogue are honest and sincere. A participant with ulterior motives, or whose truthfulness is suspect, will typically be identifiable from the quality of his or her scholarship.

In addition to being solid scholars and religious leaders, participants must be self-critical of both themselves and their religious traditions. To engage in analytical criticism of another religious tradition while refusing to objectively consider any objections to one's own tradition is hypocritical, and will fail not only in dialogue, but also in evangelism. Only by honestly considering the criticism levied against one's own religious tradition can one effectively respond to the criticism.

What Should Participants Expect From the Dialogue?

As stated in the previous article, the primary goal of dialogue should be increased understanding of the similarities and differences between religious communities.

Calvin Shenk notes that participants should first see the other participants as people created in the image of God, and secondarily as members of a foreign religious community.⁶ One goal should thus be to find a way in which people can peaceably coexist in a pluralistic society. Terry Muck states, "This growing political and social reality [i.e., pluralism] means that in order to be civically, socially, politically and theologically responsible, Christians need to be able to talk with those of other religious traditions."⁷ Sincere understanding of different traditions can lessen the risk of the sectarian strife that occurred during religious conflict, such as during the Inquisition and the Thirty Years' War, and continues in Ireland and other areas.

Another goal is that interreligious dialogue will increase the efficacy of evangelism. By clearly understanding the beliefs and practices of other religious communities, evangelists can more effectively identify the ways in which the gospel can be presented. Apologetics will also improve as Christians understand more clearly the objections that other religions have to Christianity.

Finally, encounters with other religions will increase the appreciation that Christians have for their faith. This can inspire Christians to address concerns and weaknesses in their local churches, resulting in increased retention of members who might otherwise have been attracted by the vibrancy of other religious communities.

How Should Interreligious Dialogue Be Conducted?

The potential for successful interreligious dialogue hinges upon the guidelines that are followed during engagement. Violation of the common principles of dialogue, so clearly outlined by Swidler, invariably results in failure. These common principles include:

Dialogue Is Not Debate

Interreligious dialogue is not a forum for debate and hostile argumentation. The purpose of dialogue, as LDS scholar Stephen Robinson stated in his dialogue with evangelical Craig Blomberg, "is neither to attack nor to defend — there will be no winner at the end of it."⁸ Instead,

because the purpose of dialogue is to increase understanding, formal debate should occur outside of dialogue.

This does not mean that there will not, or should not, be open disagreement during dialogue. Because differences that are at the core of peoples' belief systems are at issue, there will be frequent disagreement. However, dialogue is not the forum for attempting to prove the superiority of one belief system over another. Open disagreement should primarily occur only when a participant believes that another participant has made or promoted a misconception of the first's beliefs or practices. For example, in the hypothetical case of dialogue between an evangelical Christian and a Mormon, it would be inappropriate for the evangelical to tell the Mormon that the LDS concept of God is erroneous, even though the teaching is not in line with orthodox Christianity. It would be appropriate for the evangelical to present the evangelical view of God and note the differences between that exist evangelicalism and Mormonism; the evangelical would only be restricted from openly criticizing the LDS view. However, if the evangelical were to claim that the LDS Church continues to officially promote polygamy on earth, it would be proper for the Mormon to correct this misconception.

It is important to remember that dialogue is not a monologue. It is a forum for speaking *with* participants from other religions, not for speaking *at* them.

Participants Must Be Allowed Self-Definition

This principle, clearly related to the above principle, is one of the most crucial rules in interreligious dialogue. Participants must be allowed to define their beliefs, and their understanding of their religion's teachings, without contradiction from other participants.

Shenk clarifies this point:

It is important to understand the difference between the meaning we project onto religions, and what other religions understand as their own meaning. Even if we know well the religious system, we must listen to the person's perspectives of faith and truth, and be open to the faith as the faithful hold it. It is misleading to interpret what others are saying in terms of our concepts and worldview.⁹

In other words, participants must not claim that another participant is not accurately presenting his or her beliefs. Instead, participants must assume, unless evidence proves otherwise, that the stated beliefs accurately reflect the faith as held by that participant.

This does not mean that all self-definitions must be naively accepted. It is perfectly appropriate to question a participant about the orthodoxy of his or her beliefs when those beliefs seem to differ from the historic faith of the religion in question. If an evangelical participant in a dialogue with the Unification Church were to claim that evangelicals believe that the crucifixion was insufficient for the forgiveness of sins, it would be appropriate for the Unification participant to question whether the statement is considered orthodox in light of its deviation from historic evangelicalism.

Also related to this point is that participants must be able to recognize themselves when their faith is defined by other participants. Swidler states, "For the sake of understanding, each dialogue participant will naturally attempt to express for herself what she thinks is the meaning of the partner's statement; the partner must be able to recognize herself in that expression."¹⁰ If a participant believes a definition to be inaccurate, then open disagreement would be appropriate.

Rhetoric Must Be Moderate

Just as interreligious dialogue is not a forum for debate, it is also not a battleground in which polemical rhetoric is appropriate. The highly charged, inflammatory rhetoric used in many counter-cult endeavors has no place in interreligious dialogue.

An example of this rhetoric can be found in an article written by Ed Decker about his interaction with members of the LDS Church:

I have noticed something very similar in so many of the letters [from Mormons]. There is a thread tying it all together. I hate to use the word, brainwashing, but that is the closest word to fit...Minds seem to go blank. Often, eyes dilate and a testimony is chanted out almost by rote...Any person familiar with hypnosis knows the signs. We called it brainwashing during the Korean War. They call it bearing their testimony.¹¹

It is regrettable that such writing is common among some in the field of counter-cult apologetics; even this author must confess to having fallen into the trap of using aggressive polemics. While it is virtuous to defend the truth, it is ignoble to use pejoratives in the process. Such virulent rhetoric has absolutely no place in interreligious dialogue.

The rule for participants in interreligious dialogue, as it should be for Christians in all areas of life, is to *speak the truth in love*.¹²

Participants Must Be Self-Critical

Participants must be as willing to critically examine their own religion as they are to examine other religions. This does not mean that participants will not be dedicated to their own faith traditions; such people invariably fall into the error of syncretism. Instead, it means that participants must take seriously the objections that others have to their religion.

Such objectivity is not only essential to successful interreligious dialogue; it is also biblical. Paul praised the Bereans for checking his teachings against Scripture.¹³ Being self-critical enables Christians to separate the true gospel from the cultural trappings that too often color the understanding of Christian teaching. Self-criticism also enables Christians to effectively answer objections that others may have to Christianity.

Participants Must Objectively Utilize Other Perspectives

Participants must be willing to honestly consider how people in other religions understand and live their faith. In other words, participants must be willing to walk in the shoes of others.

Such a position is not syncretistic; it is simply sympathetic. It allows participants to realize that "a religion is not merely something of the head, but also of the spirit, heart, and 'whole being,' individual and communal."¹⁴ Christians who are passionate about their faith should be sensitive to the experiences of others, even if those experiences conflict with what Christians know to be true. Such sensitivity allows Christians to understand the temporal benefits people receive from their faiths. It also allows Christians to understand what motivates people in other religions to reject Christianity, or convinces Christians to convert to other religions, and thus sharpens the Christians' apologetics and increases awareness of weaknesses that may exist in the church.

Vocabulary Must Be Clearly Defined

One of the central areas in which interreligious dialogue can be useful is in clarifying religious terminology. John V. Taylor states,

Communication between one [religion] and another is fraught with difficulty which must not be underestimated. As dialogue begins, therefore, we shall frequently find that the same word carries an entirely different cluster of meanings in the different traditions; we may also discover with surprise that quite different words are used to mean the same thing.¹⁵

Miscommunication can easily arise in interreligious conversations; formal dialogue is a method for clarifying the vocabulary.

A Forseen Objection to the Objectives of Enhanced Evangelism and Apologetics

It would be unrealistic to assume that many current participants in interreligious dialogue will approve of the stated goal of using interreligious dialogue as a means to clarified understanding of other religious communities, and then using that understanding to increase the efficacy of evangelism of the communities and apologetics against their criticism of Christianity. John Saliba, an expert in dialogue with new religious movements, clearly states the objection to these objectives:

Those theologians involved in dialogue between the various Christian churches and world religions do not stress the kind of conversion that involves a change of church membership but, rather, inner conversion within one's religious tradition. They argue that the conversion of non-Christians is not to be identified with the church's mission of evangelization. The Christian witness to others, though a necessary part of Christian life, is not to be directed to lead, much less to force, non-Christians to abandon their religious traditions and commitments.¹⁶

He adds, "Anybody who proposes one belief system as the ideal faith to which everybody should conform in a society that implements that religion's moral and theological objectives is liable to put obstacles in the path of dialogue between people of different faith and ideologies."¹⁷

Saliba's position is not insignificant; the majority of participants in dialogue are opposed to active evangelism and apologetics. While many participants would agree with the guidelines listed above, they would object to the evangelical motive for engaging in the process.

The latter statement by Saliba is also important. The evangelical emphasis on evangelism and the defense of orthodox Christianity will alienate many potential participants in dialogue whose motive is acceptance as equals in spiritual endeavors. His statement that "in dialogue no one is a second-class citizen; no one belongs to an elite religious group possessing secret knowledge; no one monopolizes divine revelation; and no one claims total and absolute superiority."¹⁸ means more than simply refraining from criticism during dialogue: it means that, according to scholars such as himself, all religions should be accepted as equal in terms of their relation to Truth.

An Evangelical Response to this Objection

It is important that evangelical Christians who intend to participate in dialogue realize that conservative theology will serve as an obstacle in the path of dialogue. Many individuals and communities will refuse to dialogue with a Christian who is committed to the essentials of historic Christianity, even if that Christian is engaging in dialogue in order to gain an accurate understanding of other traditions and will not evangelize or criticize during the dialogue.

In such cases, evangelicals must, of course, simply acknowledge that the missiological differences between evangelicalism and the religion in question make dialogue impossible. As Saliba states, "The response to these groups must be guided by the Christian principles of charity and justice and by the dictates of common sense."¹⁹

Christians are commanded in the Bible to both evangelize and engage in apologetics.²⁰ These commandments cannot be compromised through syncretistic religious agreement. Douglas Groothuis admirably states the Christian position *vis-a-vis* other religions: "Given their contradictory claims and the nature of truth, [other religions] cannot all be one with the truth. They offer vastly different views of spiritual reality and salvation. Yet in Christ, we are offered spiritual reality in the flesh, a reality that welcomes *all* to partake of his grace."²¹

Nonetheless, even though the exclusivistic nature of orthodox Christianity is a barrier to dialogue as understood by many non-evangelical scholars, conservative Christians must endeavor to engage non-Christians in dialogue. The definition of dialogue, as even Saliba admits, is not limited to the consensus of non-evangelical scholars.²² Evangelicals must attempt to engage in dialogue not only because the clarified understanding of other religious communities will increase the efficacy of evangelism and apologetics, but also because that understanding will improve the ability of Christians and non-Christians to peaceably co-exist in a pluralistic society.

1 Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Philadelphia: WJK, 1996), 147.

2 Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20.1 (1983): 1 – 4.

3 Secretariat for the Promotion of the Unity of Christians, "Reflections and Suggestions Concerning Ecumenical Dialogue," in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Vol. 1, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1992), 542.

4 Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 17.

5 Secretariat for the Promotion of the Unity of Christians, "Reflections and Suggestions Concerning Ecumenical Dialogue," 543.

6 Calvin E. Shank, *Who Do You Say That I Am?* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald, 1997), 213.

7 Terry Muck, "Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue: A History of Ambiguity" (paper read at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Francisco, Calif, November 1992.

8 Stephen E. Robinson, introduction to *How Wide the Divide?* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1997), 21.

9 Shank. *Who Do You Say That I Am?* 215.

10 Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue," 2.

11 Edward Decker, "A Note from Ed," *March April Newsletter 1996* [Online]. URL http://www.Saintsalive.com/newsletters/newsmarch_april.htm.

12 Ephesians 4:15.

13 Acts 17:11.

14 Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue," 3.

15 John V. Taylor, "The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue," in *Faith Meets Faith*, ed. Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 98.

16 John A. Saliba, S.J., "Dialogue with the New Religious Movements: Issues and Prospects," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 30.1 (1993): 71.

17 Ibid. 72-73.

18 Ibid. 65.

19 Ibid. 79.

20 Matthew 28:19-20; Jude 3.

21 Douglas Groothuis, *Are All Religions One?* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1996), 28.

22 Saliba, "Dialogue with the New Religious Movements," 64.