UNDERSTANDING DIALOGUE
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I. THE DIALOGUE OF HEAD, HANDS, AND HEART

The Universe Is a Cosmic Dance of Dialogue.

Dialogue—the mutually beneficial interaction of differing components—is at the very heart of the Universe, of which we humans are the highest expression: from the basic interaction of matter and energy (in Einstein’s unforgettable formula: $e=mc^2$—energy equals mass times the square of the speed of light), to the creative interaction of protons and electrons in every atom, to the vital symbiosis of body and spirit in every human, through the creative dialogue between woman and man, to the dynamic relationship between individual and society. Thus, the very essence of our humanity is dialogical, and a fulfilled human life is the highest expression of the cosmic dance of dialogue.

In the early millennia of the history of humanity we spread outward from our starting point in central Africa, and the forces of divergence were dominant. Because we live on one globe, however, we eventually began to encounter each other more and more frequently. Now the forces of stunning convergence are dominant.

During the era of divergence, we could live in isolation from each other; we could ignore each other. Now, in this era of convergence, we are forced to live in one world. We increasingly live in a global village. We cannot ignore “the other,” the person who is different or the custom that is unfamiliar. Too often in the past we have tried to make over “the other” into a likeness of ourselves, often by violence. But this violence is the very opposite of dialogue. This egocentric arrogance is in fundamental opposition to the cosmic dance of dialogue. It is not creative; it is destructive.

Hence, we humans today have a stark choice: dialogue or death.
Dialogue of Head, Hands, and Heart

Because we humans are self-reflecting/correcting beings, we are capable of self-transforming dialogue. There are for us four main dimensions to this activity of dialogue that correspond to the structure of our humanness: Dialogue of the Head, Dialogue of the Hands, Dialogue of the Heart, Dialogue of (W)Holiness.

The Cognitive or Intellectual: Seeking the Truth
In the “Dialogue of the Head” we mentally reach out to “the other” to learn from those who think differently from us. We try to understand how they see the world and why they act as they do. The world is far too complicated for any of us to understand alone; we can increasingly understand reality only with the help of “the other,” in dialogue. This enlarged understanding is very important, because how we understand the world determines how we act in the world.

The Illative or Ethical: Seeking the Good
In the “Dialogue of the Hands” we join together with others to work to make the world a better place in which we all must live together. Since we can no longer live separately in this one world, we must work jointly to make it not just a house, but a home for all of us to live in. In other words, we join hands with “the other” to heal the world. The world within us, and all around us, always is in need of healing, and our deepest wounds can be healed only together with “the other,” only in dialogue.

The Affective or Aesthetic: Seeking the Beautiful
In the “Dialogue of the Heart” we open ourselves to receive the beauty of “the other.” Because we humans are body and spirit or, rather, body-spirit, we give bodily-spiritual expression in all the arts to our multifarious responses to life: joy, sorrow, gratitude, anger, and, most of all, love. We try to express our inner feelings, which grasp reality in far deeper and higher ways than we are able to put into rational concepts and words; hence, we create poetry, music, dance, painting, architecture—the expressions of the heart. All the world delights in beauty, and so it is here that we find the easiest encounter with “the other,” the simplest door to dialogue.

(W)Holiness: Seeking the One
We humans cannot long live a divided life. If we are even to survive, let alone flourish, we must “get it all together.” We must live a whole life. In a way there is a fourth “H” here, if we play a little with our English
word “whole,” for it is pronounced as “hole.” Indeed, this is what the
religions of the western tradition mean when they say that we humans
should be holy. We humans are not dis-integrated beings. Rather, we can
be truly human only if we bring our various parts together in harmony, if
we integrate our being holistically. Therefore, we are authentically human
only when our multiple elements are in dialogue with each other, and we in
turn are in dialogue with the others around us. We must dance together the
of the Heart” within the (W)Holy Cosmic Dance of Dialogue.

Those who know western Medieval Philosophy will recognize that
these are the “Metaphysicals,” the four aspects of Being itself perceived
from different perspectives: the One, the True, the Good, the Beautiful.

II. WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

The Meaning of Dialogue

Dialogue is a two-way communication between persons who hold
significantly differing views on a subject, with the purpose of learning
more truth about the subject from the other. Dialogue is not the process of
imparting truth, however gently and kindly, to the ignorant. Dialogue must
include a common understanding that no one side has a monopoly on the
truth on any given subject.

We are, of course, in this context speaking about a particular kind
of dialogue, namely, interreligious dialogue in the broadest sense, that is,
dialogue on a religious subject by persons who understand themselves to
be in different religious traditions and communities. If religion is under-
stood as an “explanation of the ultimate meaning of life and how to live
accordingly,” then that would include all such systems even though they
customarily would not be called religions but, rather, ideologies, such as
atheistic Humanism and Marxism; hence, it is more accurate to speak of
both interreligious and interideological dialogue.

Why Dialogue Arose

One can, of course, justifiably point to a number of recent develop-
ments that have contributed to the rise of dialogue: growth in mass educa-
tion and communications and travel; a world economy; and the threat of
global destruction; nevertheless, a major underlying cause is a paradigm-
shift in the West in how we perceive and describe the world. A paradigm is the model, the cluster of assumptions, on whose basis phenomena are perceived and explained; for example, the geocentric paradigm for explaining the movements of the planets. A shift to another paradigm—as to the heliocentric—will have a major impact. Such a paradigm-shift has occurred and is still occurring in the western understanding of truth statements, which has made dialogue not only possible but even necessary.

Whereas the understanding of truth in the West was largely absolute, static, monologic, or exclusive up to the last century, it has subsequently become deabsolutized, dynamic, and dialogic—in a word: relational.

All statements about reality are now seen to be related to the historical context, intentionality, perspective, language, and interpretation of the speaker, and in that sense no longer “absolute.” Therefore, if my perception and description of the world are true only in a limited sense, that is, only as seen from my place in the world, then if I wish to expand my grasp of reality I need to learn from others what they know of reality that they can perceive from their place in the world that I cannot see from mine. That, however, can happen only through dialogue.

**Who Should Dialogue**

Dialogue should involve every level of the religious, ideological communities, from the official representatives and experts in the various traditions to the “persons in the pews.” Only in this way will the religious, ideological communities learn from each other and come to understand each other as they truly are.

What is needed for dialogue participants then is 1) an openness to learn from the other, 2) knowledge of one’s own tradition, and 3) an equally disposed and knowledgeable dialogue partner from the other tradition. This exchange can happen on almost any level of knowledge and education. The key is the openness to learn from the other.

**Kinds of Dialogue**

The three kinds or levels of dialogue are 1) ideas and words, 2) joint action or collaboration, and 3) prayer or sharing of the spiritual or depth dimension of our traditions. While the intellectual and verbal communication is indeed the primary meaning of dialogue, it will prove sterile if the results do not spill over into the other two areas of action and spirituality.
Serious involvement in joint action and/or spirituality will tend to challenge the previously held intellectual positions and lead to dialogue in the cognitive field. Catholic and Protestant clergy, for example, who found themselves together in concentration camp Dachau because of joint resistance to one or another Nazi anti-human action, began to ask each other why they did what they did and through dialogue were surprised to learn that they held many more positions in common than positions that separated them. In fact, these encounters and others like them fostered the Una Sancta Movement in Germany, which in turn was the engine that moved the Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) to embrace ecumenism and interreligious dialogue after many centuries of vigorous official rejection.

Encountering our partner on merely one or two levels will indeed be authentic dialogue, but, given the integrative and comprehensive nature of religion and ideology, it is only natural that we be led from dialogue on one level to the others. Only with dialogue in this full fashion on all three levels will our interreligious, interideological dialogue be complete.

**Goals of Dialogue**

The general goal of dialogue is for each side to learn and to change accordingly. Naturally, if each side comes to the encounter primarily to learn from the other, then the other side must teach, and thus both learning and teaching occur. We gradually learn more and more about our partners in the dialogue and in the process shuck off any misinformation about them. Our dialogue partner likewise becomes for us something of a mirror in which we perceive ourselves in new ways.

This expanded knowledge of ourselves and of “the other” cannot, of course, remain ineffective in our lives. As our self-understanding and understanding of those persons and things around us change, so too must our attitude and behavior toward ourselves and others change. To repeat: The goal of dialogue is that each side learn and change accordingly.

We need to learn first and as fully as possible the things we share in common with our dialogue partners, which most often will be much more extensive than we could have anticipated; we will thus be drawn together in greater harmony. Then, we learn more comprehensively what our differences are. Such differences may be 1) complementary, as, for example, a stress on the prophetic rather than the mystical; 2) analogous, as, for example, the notion of God in the Semitic religions and of *sunyata* in Mahayana Buddhism; or 3) contradictory, where the acceptance of one
entails the rejection of the other, as, for example, the Judeo-Christian notion of the inviolable dignity of each individual person and the now largely disappeared Hindu custom of *suttee*, widow-burning. The issue of the third category of differences will be discussed below. The differences in the first two categories are not simply to be perceived and acknowledged; they should be cherished and celebrated both for their own sakes. By discerning them we have extended our own understanding of reality and how to live accordingly—the main goal of dialogue.

**The Means of Dialogue**

A great variety of means and techniques of dialogue have been used successfully, and doubtless some are yet to be developed. Techniques that have already been utilized range from joint lectures and dialogues by experts from different traditions that are listened to by large audiences on one extreme to personal conversations between “rank and file” individuals from different traditions on the other.

In planning for any dialogue, the following issues deserve attention:

1) Use your creative imaginations and your sensitivity for persons.

2) Select representatives from all the traditions to be engaged in a dialogue, and involve them in its initial planning. This is particularly true when different communities first begin to encounter each other. Then dialogue about the potential dialogue itself becomes an essential part of the dialogic encounter.

3) In the first encounters between communities, the most difficult points of differences should not be tackled. Rather, those subjects that show promise of highlighting commonalities should be treated so that mutual trust between the partners can be established and developed.

4) Each partner is to come to the dialogue with total sincerity and honesty.

5) Care must be taken to compare our ideals with our partner’s ideals and our practices with our partner’s practices. By comparing our ideals with our partner’s practices we will always “win,” but we will learn nothing—a total defeat of the purpose of dialogue. For example, the Hindu custom mentioned above, the burning of live widows, *suttee*, is not to
be compared with the Christian commitment to the dignity of each individual life but to the centuries-long Christian practice (fortunately now abandoned) of burning witches.

6) Each partner in the dialogue must define her or himself; only a Muslim, for example, can know from the inside what is means to be a Muslim, and this self-understanding will change, expand, and deepen as the dialogue develops, and hence can be accurately described only by the one experiencing the living, growing religious reality.

7) Each partner needs to come to the dialogue with no fixed assumptions as to where the authentic differences between the traditions are; only after following the partner with sympathy and agreement as far as one can without violating one’s own integrity will the true point of difference be determined.

8) Of course, only equals can engage in full, authentic dialogue.

9) Each partner is to come with a self-critical attitude toward himself or herself and the religious tradition he or she represents. Given that the primary goal of dialogue is to learn, to grow, and to change, we need to be willing to divest ourselves of a position we take should the dialogue reveal important reasons to do so.

10) The most fundamental means to dialogue is to have a clear expectation of the primary goal of the engagement: a two-way communication so that both partners can learn from each other and change accordingly.

The Subject of Dialogue

Three main subject areas of dialogue include the cognitive, active, and spiritual.

The cognitive area holds the greatest range of possible subjects. It is almost unlimited—remembering the caution that the less difficult topics be chosen first and the more difficult later. Every dialogue group should nevertheless be encouraged to follow creatively its own inner instinct and interests. Some groups will start with more particular, concrete matters and then be gradually drawn to discuss the underlying issues and principles. Others will begin with more fundamental matters and eventually be drawn to reflect on more and more concrete implications of the basic principles already discovered. In any case, if proper preparation and sensitivity are provided, no subject should a priori be declared off-limits.
In the *active* area dialogue has to take place on the underlying principles for action that motivate each tradition. Once again many similarities will be found, as well as differences that will prove significant in determining the communities’ differing stands on various issues of personal and social ethics. It is only by carefully and sensitively locating those underlying ethical principles for decision-making that later misunderstandings and unwarranted frustrations in specific ethical issues can be avoided. Then specific ethical matters, such as sexual ethics, social ethics, ecological ethics, or medical ethics can become the focus of interreligious, interideological dialogue—and ultimately joint action can take place where it has been found congruent with each tradition’s principles and warranted in the concrete circumstances.

In some ways the *spiritual* area would seem to be the most attractive, at least to those with a more interior, mystical, psychological bent. Moreover, it promises a very great degree of commonality: The mystics appear to all meet together on a high level of unity with the Ultimate Reality no matter how it is described, including even in the more philosophical systems such as Neoplatonism. For instance, the greatest of the Muslim Sufis, Jewish Kabbalists, Hindu Bhaktas, Christian Mystics, Buddhist Bodhisattvas, and Platonist Philosophers all seem to be at one in their striving for and experience of unity with the One, which in the West is called God, *Theos*. At times the image is projected of God’s being the peak of the mountain that all humans are climbing by way of different paths. Each one has a different way (*hodos* in Christian Greek, *halachah* in Jewish Hebrew, *shar’ia* in Muslim Arabic, *marga* in Hindu Sanskrit, *magga* in Buddhist Pali, *tao* in Chinese Taoism) to reach *Theos*, but all are centered on the one goal. Consequently, such an interpretation of religion or ideology is called theocentric.

Attractive as is theocentrism, one must be cautious not to waive the varying understandings of God aside as if they were without importance; they can make a significant difference in human self-understanding and hence how we behave toward ourselves, each other, the world around us, and the Ultimate Source. Moreover, a theocentric approach has the disadvantage of not including nontheists in the dialogue. This would exclude not only atheistic Humanists and Marxists, but also nontheistic Theravada Buddhists, who do not deny the existence of God but rather understand ultimate reality in a nontheistic, nonpersonal manner (theism posits a “personal” God, *Theos*). One alternative way to include these partners in the dialogue, even in this area of “spirituality,” is to speak of the search for ultimate meaning in life, for “salvation” (*salus* in Latin, meaning a salutary, whole, [w]holy life; similarly, *soteria* in Greek), as what all humans
have in common in the “spiritual” area, theists and nontheists. As a result, we can speak of a soteriocentrism.

When to Dialogue—and When Not

In principle, of course, we ought to be open to dialogue with all possible partners on all possible subjects, at least until we learn where our true differences lie.

In this matter of differences, however, we have to be very careful in the distinctions we need to make. As pointed out above, in the process of the dialogue we will often learn that what we thought were real differences in fact turn out to be only apparent differences; different words or misunderstandings merely hid commonly shared positions. When we enter dialogue, however, we have to allow for the possibility that we will ultimately learn that on some matters we will find not a commonality but an authentic difference. These authentic differences can be of three kinds: complementary, analogous, or contradictory.

Complementary authentic differences will of course be true differences, but not such that only one could be valid. Furthermore, we know from our experience that the complementary differences will usually far outnumber the contradictory. Similarly, learning of these authentic but complementary differences will not only enhance our knowledge, but it also may very well lead to the desire to adapt one or more of our partner’s complementary differences for oneself. As the very term indicates, the differences somehow complete each other, as the Chinese Taoist saying puts it: Xiang fan xiang cheng (Contraries complete each other).

We must not too easily and quickly place our true differences in the contradictory category. Perhaps, for example, Hindu moksha, Zen Buddhist satori, Christian “freedom of the children of God,” and the Marxist “communist state” could be understood as different, but nevertheless analogous, descriptions of true human liberation. In speaking of true but analogous differences in beliefs or values here, we are no longer talking about discerning teachings or practices in our partner’s tradition that we might then wish to appropriate for our own tradition. We are speaking of a difference that operates within the total organic structure of the other religion-ideology and that fulfills its function properly only within it. These real but analogous differences in beliefs or values should be seen not as in conflict with one another but as parallel in function and, in that sense, analogous.

At times, though, we can find contradictory truth claims, value claims,
presented by different religious-ideological traditions. That happens, of course, only when they cannot be seen as somehow ultimately different expressions of the same thing (a commonality) or as complementary or analogous. When it happens, however, even though it be relatively rare, a profound and unavoidable problem faces the two communities: What should be their attitude and behavior toward each other? Should they remain in dialogue, tolerate each other, ignore each other, or oppose each other? This problem is especially pressing in matters of value judgments. What, for example, should the Christian (or Jew or Muslim or Marxist) have done in face of the now largely (but unfortunately not entirely) suppressed Hindu tradition of suttee? Should he or she try to learn its value, tolerate it, ignore it, oppose it (in what manner)? What about the Nazi tenet of killing all Jews? These, however, are relatively clear issues, but what of a religion-ideology that approves slavery, as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam did until a century ago? Maybe that is clear enough today, but what of sexism—or only a little sexism? Or what about the claim that only through capitalism—or socialism—can human liberation be gained? Making a decision on the proper stance becomes less and less clear-cut. At times, the choice to oppose a position or practice may be the peacemaking choice; even then the skills of deep listening and the willingness to change may be all important.

Eventually it was clear to most non-Hindus in the nineteenth century that the proper attitude was not to dialogue with Hinduism on suttee, but to oppose the practice. Apparently it was not so clear to all non-Nazis that opposition to Jewish genocide was the right stance to take. Furthermore, it took Christians almost 2,000 years to come to the conclusion to abolish slavery. Many religions and ideologies today stand in the midst of a battle over sexism, some even refusing to admit the existence of the issue. Lastly, no argument need be made to point out the controversial nature of the contemporary capitalism-socialism issue.

Obviously, important contradictory differences between religions-ideologies do exist and at times warrant not dialogue, but opposition. Individually, we also make critical judgments on the acceptability of positions within our own traditions and, rather frequently, within our personal lives. But certainly this exercise of our critical faculties is not to be limited to ourselves and our tradition; this perhaps most human of faculties should be made available to all—with all the proper constraints and concerns for dialogue already detailed at length. Of course, it must first be determined on what grounds we can judge whether a religious-ideological difference is in fact contradictory, and then, if it is, whether it is of sufficient importance and of a nature to warrant active opposition.
Full Human Life

Because all religions and ideologies are attempts to explain the meaning of human life and how to live accordingly, it would seem that those doctrines and customs that are perceived as hostile to human life are not complementary or analogous but contradictory and that opposition should be proportional to the extent they threaten life. What is to be included in an authentically full human life, then, must be the measure against which all elements of all religions-ideologies must be tested as we make judgments about whether they are harmonious, complementary, analogous, or contradictory—and then act accordingly.

What in this century has been acknowledged as the foundation of being human is that human beings ought to be autonomous in their decisions—such decisions being directed by their own reason and limited only by the same rights of others. Though frequently resistant in the past, and too often still in the present, the great religious communities of the world have likewise often and in a variety of ways expressed a growing awareness of and commitment to many of the same notions of what it means to be fully human. Hence, through dialogue humanity is painfully, slowly creeping toward a consensus on what is involved in an authentically full human life. The 1948 United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights was an important step in that direction. Of course, much more consensus needs to be attained if interreligious, interideological dialogue is to reach its full potential.

The conclusion from these reflections, I believe, is clear: Interreligious, interideological dialogue is absolutely necessary in our contemporary world. We will not achieve our full potential for a full human life without learning to practice authentic dialogue.

Study Questions for Understanding Dialogue

1. Why do I believe that interreligious dialogue is essential today?

2. Give examples of dialogue of the head, hands, heart, and wholeness.

2. What suggestions and/or cautions can you envision for exchange of beliefs and ideas, engaging in joining actions, and sharing prayer or spiritual activities in interreligious contexts?