

THE DIALOGUE DECALOGUE

Ground Rules for Interreligious, Interideological Dialogue

LEONARD SWIDLER

DIALOGUE@TEMPLE.EDU

<http://www.dialogueinstitute.org>

(Probes & AIR—Rebecca Mays, rkm@dialogueinstitute.org)

This is the “classical” version of the *Dialogue Decalogue*, written before the term **Deep-Dialogue** was invented. Also, this version focuses on the “Dialogue of the Head” (there are also the “Dialogues of the Hands, Heart, and Holy”—see “Deep-Dialogue/Critical-Thinking/Competitive-Cooperation: The Most Authentic Human Way to Be and Act,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 47, 2 (Spring, 2012), 143-151.): The first version of just four ground rules was published as “Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue,” in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 15, 3 (Summer, 1978), pp. 413f.; and expanded to the, “The Dialogue Decalogue: Groundrules for Interreligious Dialogue,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20,1 (Winter, 1983): 1-4; from 1984 onward the title was “Dialogue Decalogue: Groundrules for Interreligious, Interideological Dialogue.” It has been reproduced in at least 39 publications in at least 9 different languages. These commonsense guidelines were named “**D**ialogue **D**ecalogue” for mnemonic, pedagogical reasons: At least Jews, Christians, and Muslims will recognize and easily recall the term the “**D**ecalogue,” the “Ten Commandments”; plus, the alliteration of **D**... **D** also aids recall. However, with the expansion of dialogue to increasingly include non-Abrahamic religions, and even secular versions of religions (e.g., Humanism), the term “Commandments” is replaced by “Principles.” Especially for groups, this version also adds suggestions for “Probes,” which groups could create and play as one way to make the guidelines more “tangible”—as well as *A/R*-Statements as developed by Rebecca Mays.

Dialogue is a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that s/he can change and grow. This very definition of dialogue embodies the first commandment of dialogue.

In the religious-ideological sphere in the past, we came together to discuss with those differing with us, for example, Catholics with Protestants, either to defeat an opponent, or to learn about an opponent so as to deal more effectively with her or him, or at best, to negotiate with him or her. If we faced each other at all, it was in confrontation—sometimes more openly polemically, sometimes more subtly so, but always with the ultimate goal of defeating the other, because we were convinced that we alone had the absolute truth.

But dialogue is *not* debate. In dialogue, each partner must listen to the other as openly and sympathetically as s/he can in an attempt to understand the other’s position as precisely and, as it were, as much from within, as possible. Such an attitude automatically includes the assumption that at any point we might find the partner’s position so persuasive that, if we would act with integrity, we would have to change—and change can be disturbing.

We are speaking of a specific kind of dialogue, an *inter*-religious/ideological dialogue. To have such, it is not sufficient that the dialogue partners discuss a religious/ideological subject, i.e., the “ultimate meaning of life and how to live accordingly.” Rather, they must come to the dialogue as persons somehow significantly identified with a religious or ideological community. If I were neither a Christian nor a Marxist, for example, I could not participate as a “partner” in Christian-Marxist dialogue, though I might listen in, ask some questions for information, and make some helpful comments.

It is obvious that interreligious, interideological dialogue is something new. We could not conceive of it, let alone do it in the past. How, then, can we effectively engage in this new thing? The following are some basic ground rules, or “commandments,” of interreligious, interideological dialogue that must be observed if dialogue is actually to take place. These are not theoretical rules, or commandments given from “on high,” but ones that have been learned from hard experience.

FIRST PRINCIPLE: *The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly.* Minimally, the very fact that I learn that my dialogue partner believes “this” rather than “that” proportionally changes my attitude toward her; and a

change in my attitude is a significant change in me. We enter into dialogue so that *we* can learn, change, and grow, not so we can force change on the *other*, as one hopes to do in debate—a hope realized in inverse proportion to the frequency and ferocity with which debate is entered into. On the other hand, because in dialogue *each* partner comes with the intention of learning and changing herself, one's partner in fact will also change. Thus, the goal of debate, and much more, is accomplished far more effectively by dialogue.

PROBE: FIRST, create a skit in the form of a *Debate*, that is, one side takes the Affirmative and the other side the Negative: A is/not B—e.g., Humans should/should not be completely free to embrace a religion.

SECOND, set up a *Dialogue* format on the subject, that is, each side rather than seeking to "defeating the other side," as is the aim in *Debate*, seeks to learn from the other side—e.g., a *Dialogue* about the about different possible reasons for freedom or compulsion concerning the embrace of religion.

THIRD, reflect on the different results, their advantages/disadvantages.

SECOND PRINCIPLE: *Interreligious, interideological dialogue must be a two-sided project—within each religious or ideological community and between religious or ideological communities.* Because of the "communal" nature of interreligious dialogue, and since the primary goal of dialogue is that each partner learn and change himself, it is also necessary that each participant enter into dialogue not only with his partner across the faith line—the Lutheran with the Anglican, for example—but also with his coreligionists, with his fellow Lutherans, to share with them the fruits of the interreligious dialogue. Only thus can the whole community eventually learn and change, moving toward an ever more perceptive insight into reality.

PROBE: FIRST, create a skit wherein two religious (or ethnic, or...) groups strongly distinguish themselves from other groups—e.g., Christians reject the Law/Ritual (which Jews allegedly strongly adhere to), and opt instead for freedom and grace.

SECOND, redo the skit showing how each side is much more complicated than the prior rigid portrayals—e.g., there is a spectrum of Jewish attitudes toward the Law/Ritual, as well as among Christians (e.g., Fundamentalists to Liberals).

THIRD, reflect on how often reality is much more complicated than we often assume, and what the implications ought to be for us.

THIRD PRINCIPLE: *Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity.* It should be made clear in what direction the major and minor thrusts of the tradition move, what the future shifts might be, and, if necessary, where the participant has difficulties with her own tradition. No false fronts have any place in dialogue.

Conversely—each participant must assume a similar complete honesty and sincerity in the other partners. Not only will the absence of sincerity prevent dialogue from happening, but the absence of the assumption of the partner's sincerity will do so as well. In brief: no trust, no dialogue.

PROBE: FIRST, set up a skit in which each side insists flatly that, e.g., all non-Catholics, or non-Muslims, or... "will go to hell."

SECOND, redo the skit wherein each side starts out with the same negative position, but this time, stating them *only* with "I" statements, that is, e.g., "*I think that...*" or "*I believe that...*" or "*I am persuaded that...*" giving the other side by its friendlier tone an invitation to ask, why you think, believe, are persuaded...

THIRD, reflect on whether or how "I" statements allow and encourage both greater honesty on both sides, and the likelihood of both sides learning from each other.

FOURTH PRINCIPLE: *In interreligious, interideological dialogue we must not compare our ideals with our partner's practice,* but rather our ideals with our partner's ideals, our practice with our partner's practice. For example, compare the former Hindu practice of burning live widows (*suttee*) with the Christian former practice of burning witches and *auto da fe*'s.

PROBE: FIRST, set up a skit which compares the virtues of one group with the "vices" of a second (or more) group(s)—e.g., the Christian valuing of life (Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself") with the Hindu practice of burning live widows along with the husband's body (*suttee*).

SECOND, redo the skit comparing the "virtues" and the "vices" of the two groups—e.g., the prior Hindu practice of *burning live widows (suttee)* with the Christian former practice of *burning witches and auto da fe*'s.

THIRD, reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

FIFTH PRINCIPLE: *Each participant must define himself.* Only the Jew, for example, can define what it

means to be a Jew. The rest can only describe what it looks like from the outside. Moreover, because dialogue is a dynamic medium, as each participant learns, he will change and hence continually deepen, expand, and modify his self-definition as a Jew—being careful to remain in constant dialogue with fellow Jews. Thus, it is mandatory that each dialogue partner define what it means to be an authentic member of his own tradition.

Conversely—the one interpreted must be able to recognize herself in the interpretation. This is the golden rule of interreligious hermeneutics, as has been often reiterated by the “apostle of interreligious dialogue,” Raimundo Panikkar. 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. The advocate of “a world theology,” Wilfred Cantwell Smith, would add that the expression must also be verifiable by critical observers who are not involved.

PROBE: FIRST, create a skit wherein, for example, a Jew, Muslim, Christian.... describe her/his religion’s position five hundred years ago on the morality of slavery.

SECOND, redo the skit and have the various religions describe their position on the morality of slavery today.

THIRD, reflect on the profound implications on change in religious traditions, teachings, and sacred scriptures.

SIXTH PRINCIPLE: *Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are.* Rather, each partner should not only listen to the other partner with openness and sympathy but also attempt to agree with the dialogue partner as far as is possible while still maintaining integrity with his own tradition; where he absolutely can agree no further without violating his own integrity, precisely there is the real point of disagreement—which most often turns out to be different from the point of disagreement that was falsely assumed ahead of time.

PROBE: FIRST, one or more persons state what s/he thinks another group, believes and practices, e.g., Christians and Muslims believe that all Buddhists are atheists, and that at death humans simply cease to exist.

SECOND, in a short time, or, perhaps even overnight, each member of the group does as much research on the claim as possible in the allotted time (internet, books, live interviews) and reports back to the group, which then comes up with its now better-informed current understanding, and

THIRD, reflect on how in/accurate they were at the beginning, and what the implications are from their experience.

SEVENTH PRINCIPLE: *Dialogue can take place only between equals—both coming to learn, or “par cum pari”* as Vatican Council II (1962-65) put it. Both must come to learn from each other. Therefore, if, for example, the Muslim views Hinduism as inferior, or if the Hindu views Islam as inferior, there will be no dialogue. If authentic interreligious, interideological dialogue between Muslims and Hindus is to occur, then both the Muslim and the Hindu must come mainly to learn from each other; only then will it be “equal with equal,” *par cum pari*. This rule also indicates that there can be no such thing as a one-way dialogue. For example, Jewish-Christian discussions begun in the 1960s were mainly only prolegomena to interreligious dialogue. Understandably, and properly, the Jews came to those exchanges only to teach Christians, although the Christians came mainly to learn. But, if authentic interreligious dialogue between Christians and Jews was to occur, then the Jews also had to come mainly to learn; only then did it too become *par cum pari*.

PROBE: FIRST, set up a skit with religious leaders (imam, rabbi, pastor....) on one side taking an authoritarian attitude with lay persons on the other side to discuss a religious practice of everyday importance, e.g., attending religious services, women in religious leadership roles, or....

SECOND, replay the skit with the religious leaders taking a more respectful, open attitude, and the laity being more authoritative based on both their religious knowledge and lived experience (Note: the difference between authoritarian and authoritative!)

NOTE ESPECIALLY, the role of women in both versions—equal, unequal,....?

THIRD, reflect on the implications of equality or its lack for effective dialogue—and most of all, what can be done to improve equality.

EIGHTH PRINCIPLE: *Dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual trust: approach first those issues most likely to provide common ground, thereby establishing human trust.* Although interreligious, interideological dialogue must occur with some kind of “communal” dimension, that is, the participants must be involved as members of a religious or ideological community—for instance, as Marxists or Taoists—it is also fundamentally true that it is only *persons* who can enter into dialogue. But a dialogue among persons can be built only on personal trust. Hence it is wise not to tackle the most difficult problems in the beginning, but rather to approach first those issues most likely to provide some common ground, thereby establishing the basis of

human trust. Then, gradually, as this personal trust deepens and expands, the more thorny matters can be undertaken. Thus, as in learning we move from the known to the unknown, so in dialogue we proceed from commonly held matters—which, given our mutual ignorance resulting from centuries of hostility, will take us quite some time to discover fully—to discuss matters of disagreement.

PROBE: FIRST, create a skit wherein, for example, Christians claim that God is three persons in one God, and Jews and Muslims insist on the Oneness (*echad* in Hebrew and *tawhid* in Arabic).

SECOND, following that suggested topic, recreate the encounter to focus on the Jewish, Christian, Muslim claim that all humans were created by God, and the implications of such like teachings.

THIRD, discuss the implications for starting dialogues on subjects where there is likely agreement, rather than ones where there is likely difference.

NINTH PRINCIPLE: *Persons entering into interreligious, interideological dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological traditions.* A lack of such self-criticism implies that one's tradition already has all the correct answers. Such an attitude makes dialogue not only unnecessary, but even impossible, since we enter into dialogue primarily so *we* can learn—which obviously is impossible if our tradition has never made a misstep, if it has all the right answers. Surely, in interreligious, interideological dialogue one must stand within a religious or ideological tradition with integrity and conviction, but such integrity and conviction must include, not exclude, a healthy self-criticism. Without it there can be no dialogue—and, indeed, no integrity.

PROBE: FIRST, set up a skit in which one group claims that its religion never could change, nor has ever changed, its position—e.g., list a number of consistently held positions.

SECOND, reset up a skit in which that group's religion *in fact* has changed its position, e.g., Christianity and Islam on the morality of slavery—both accepted it for centuries, and now both reject it. Question: Is equality (not sameness!) for women with men becoming the new slavery issue?

THIRD, reflect on the implications.

TENTH PRINCIPLE: *Each participant eventually must attempt to experience the partner's religion or ideology "from within,"* for a religion or ideology is not merely something of the head, but also of the spirit, heart, and "whole being," individual and communal. John Dunne here speaks of "passing over" into another's religious or ideological experience and then coming back enlightened, broadened, and deepened [Cf. John S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth* (New York: Macmillan, 1972)]. While retaining our own religious integrity, we need to find ways of experiencing something of the *emotional* and spiritual power of the symbols and cultural vehicles of our partner's religion/ideology—and then come back to our own, enriched and expanded, having experienced at least a little of the *affective* side of our partner's religion or ideology.

PROBE: FIRST, ask the members of the group to describe as graphically as possible one or two of the most deeply meaningful of her/his religious/spiritual experiences, and why they were so meaningful for them.

SECOND, discuss the similarities and differences of these deeply spiritual experiences

THIRD, each person should reflect what impact hearing about the personal *spiritual* experiences of the others affected him/her and their understanding of and attitude toward the other religion/spirituality.

Interreligious, interideological dialogue operates in *four areas*—the "Dialogues of the **Head, Hands, Heart and Holy**": the *practical* (Dialogue of the Hands), where we collaborate to help humanity; the *aesthetic/spiritual* (Dialogue of the Heart) where we attempt to experience the partner's expressions of beauty and her/his religion or ideology "from within"; the *cognitive* (Dialogue of the Head), where we seek understanding and truth, and the fourth, the *integrative* area (Dialogue of the "Holy"—comes from German *Heil* [hence, English "hale," "healthy"], and ultimately the Greek *Holos*, meaning, "whole," "integrated," "complete," "healthy").

Interreligious, interideological dialogue has *three major phases* (its more detailed *Seven Degrees* are outlined at Leonard Swidler, "Dialogue Dimensions, Directions, Degrees," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 51, 1 [Winter, 2016]) in the *first* phase we *unlearn* misinformation about each other and begin to know each other as we truly are. In phase *two* we begin to discern values in the partner's tradition and wish to appropriate them into our own tradition. For example, in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue Christians might learn a greater appreciation of the

meditative tradition, and Buddhists might learn a greater appreciation of the prophetic, social justice tradition—both values traditionally strongly, though not exclusively, associated with the other’s community. If we are serious, persistent, and sensitive enough in the dialogue, we may at times enter into phase *three*. Here we together begin to explore new areas of reality, of meaning, and of truth, of which neither of us had even been aware before. We are brought face to face with this new, as-yet-unknown-to-us dimension of reality only because of questions, insights, probings produced in the dialogue. We may thus dare to say that patiently pursued dialogue can become an instrument of new “revelation” (Latin *re*, “back,” *velatio*, “veil”) a further “un-veiling” of reality—on which we must then act.

There is something radically different about phase one on the one hand and phases two and three on the other. In the latter, we do not simply add on quantitatively another “truth” or value from the partner’s tradition. Instead, as we assimilate it within our own religious/ideological self-understanding, it will proportionately transform our self-understanding. Since our dialogue partner will be in a similar position, we will then be able to witness authentically to those elements of deep value in our own tradition that our partner’s tradition may well be able to assimilate with self-transforming profit. All this of course will have to be done with complete integrity on each side, each partner remaining authentically true to the vital core of his/her own religious/ideological tradition. However, in significant ways that vital core will be perceived and experienced differently under the influence of the dialogue; but, if the dialogue is carried on with both integrity and openness, the result will be that, for example, the Jew will be even more authentically Jewish and the Christian even more authentically Christian, *not despite* the fact that Judaism and/or Christianity may have found and adapted something of deep value in the other tradition, *but because of it*. There can be no talk of a “syncretism” here, for syncretism in the pejorative sense means amalgamating various elements of different religions into some kind of a *confused* whole without concern for the integrity of the religions involved—which is not the case with authentic dialogue

AIR ACTIVITIES TO IMPLEMENT DIALOGUE

AIR was developed in this form by Rebecca Katz Mays. The acronym stands for: “*Appreciative-Statements*,” *I-Statements*,” “*Reflective-Statements*.” They are simple, too frequently neglected, but powerful, statements that greatly facilitate Dialogue.

APPRECIATIVE-STATEMENTS: Try to make your first statement to a dialogue partner be one in which you affirm something in his/her position. For example, “I really agree with you when you say....” This is a concretization of the commonsense principle: Start with what you agree on to establish a common basis and initial trust; then move toward what you think you don’t agree on—to learn whether you in fact disagree (which is less frequently the case than is often imagined), and if so, what to do about it. This is a concrete way to spell out in practice *Commandment Eight* above: *Approach first those issues most likely to provide common ground, thereby establishing human trust.*

I-STATEMENTS: Especially when approaching a topic concerning which a variety of positions is likely, begin your position by saying, “I am convinced that...., I think that....,” or the like. That way you can carefully, even powerfully, state your position without blocking the Dialogue even before it begins—which is likely to happen with statements like, “Here is the truth...., No one can disagree that....” Flat, “take it or leave it!” blocks all further dialogue, whereas, making the same claim in the “I” form—“I think the following for these reasons....,” not only leaves open the Dialogue, but even invites it!

REFLECTIVE STATEMENTS: Since Dialogue means literally, from the Greek *dia-logos*, “thinking/talking-across/together,” we want to be sure that not only do we spell out clearly our ideas, but we likewise want to be certain that we hear/understand our partner’s ideas correctly. Both halves of the structure of Dialogue are essential! Again, we too often misunderstand what our Dialogue partner is saying, and hence are not talking *with*, but *past* each other! A simple and extremely effective remedy is—as is clearly articulated above in *Principle Five*: *The one interpreted must be able to recognize herself in the interpretation*—simply frequently say, something like, “I understand you to be saying this.... Am I understanding you correctly?”