

Principles and Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue

How to Dialogue



**We are grateful to Scarborough Foreign Mission Society for
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Dialogue Decalogue

Dr. Leonard Swidler is a highly respected American scholar in the field of interfaith dialogue. Dr. Swidler has published this set of ten inter-religious principles which have become a classic. Below please find this “dialogue decalogue” in both Short and Long versions.



SHORT VERSION

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.

SECOND PRINCIPLE

Inter-religious, inter-ideological dialogue must be a two-sided project within each religious or ideological community and between religious or ideological communities.

THIRD PRINCIPLE

Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity.

FOURTH PRINCIPLE

In inter-religious, inter-ideological 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.

FIFTH PRINCIPLE

Each participant must define himself... Conversely, the interpreted must be able to recognize herself in the interpretation.

SIXTH PRINCIPLE

Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are.

SEVENTH PRINCIPLE

Dialogue can take place only between equals... Both must come to learn from each other.

EIGHTH PRINCIPLE

Dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual trust.

NINTH PRINCIPLE

Persons entering into inter-religious, inter-ideological dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological traditions.

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.



LONG VERSION

FIRST PRINCIPLE

The essential purpose of a dialogue is to learn, which entails change. At the very least, to learn that one's dialogue partner views the world differently is to effect a change in oneself. Reciprocally, change happens for one's partner as she/he learns about oneself.

SECOND PRINCIPLE

Dialogue must be a two-sided project: both between religious/ideological groups (Inter- and Intra-). Intra-religious/ideological dialogue is vital for moving one's community toward an increasingly perceptive insight into reality.

THIRD PRINCIPLE

It is imperative that each participant comes to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity. This means not only describing the major and minor thrusts as well as potential future shifts of one's tradition, but also possible difficulties that she/he has with it.

FOURTH PRINCIPLE

One must compare only her/his ideals with their partner's ideals, and her/his practice with their partner's practice. Not their ideals with their partner's practice.

FIFTH PRINCIPLE

Each participant needs to describe her/himself. For example, only a Muslim can describe what it really means to be an authentic member of the Muslim community. At the same time, when one's partner in dialogue attempts to describe back to them what they have understood of their partner's self-description, then such a description must be recognizable to the described party.

SIXTH PRINCIPLE

Participants must not come to the dialogue with any preconceptions as to where the points of disagreement lie. A process of agreeing with their partner as much as possible, without violating the integrity of their own tradition, will reveal where the real boundaries between the traditions lie; the point where she / he cannot agree without going against the principle of their own tradition.

SEVENTH PRINCIPLE

Dialogue can only take place between equals, which means that partners learn from each other – *par cum pari* according to the Second Vatican Council – and do not merely seek to teach one another.

EIGHTH PRINCIPLE

Dialogue can only take place on the basis of mutual trust. Because it is persons, and not entire communities, that enter into dialogue, it is essential for personal trust to be established. To encourage this it is important that less controversial matters are discussed before dealing with the more controversial ones.

NINTH PRINCIPLE

Participants in dialogue should have a healthy level of criticism toward their own traditions. A lack of such criticism implies that one's tradition has all the answers, thus making dialogue not only unnecessary, but unfeasible. The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, which is impossible if one's tradition is seen as having all the answers.

TENTH PRINCIPLE

To truly understand another religion or ideology one must try to experience it from within, which requires a "passing over", even if only momentarily, into another's religious or ideological experience.

Three Goals of Interreligious Dialogue

1. To know oneself ever more profoundly and enrich and round out one's appreciation of one's own faith tradition
2. To know the other ever more authentically and gain a friendly understanding of others as they are and not in caricature
3. To live ever more fully accordingly and to establish a more solid foundation for community of life and action among persons of various traditions

(Leonard Swidler, Toward a Universal Theology of Religion, p. 26)

Principles Towards Better Interfaith Relations

1. We confess our failures and lack of love, respect and sensitivity to people of other faiths in the past. We intend to forgive one another, seek the forgiveness of others and commit ourselves to a new beginning.
2. We affirm that good interfaith relations can open the way to better interethnic relations and peace throughout the world.
3. We recognise building true community (koinonia) , both among persons and various ethnic and religious communities, as our primary objective. We need to develop a global theology that will be appropriate for the unfolding sense of a globalised world.
4. We affirm the importance of promoting a culture of dialogue within and among all religious communities and indigenous traditions.
5. We condemn violence and terrorism as being against the spirit of all true religion and we pledge ourselves to removing their causes.
6. We shall respect the integrity of all religions and ensure that they have the freedom to follow their own beliefs and practices.
7. We believe that the different religions are enriched by identifying agendas in which they can collaborate, such as making peace, protecting the environment, eradicating poverty and ensuring the human dignity of all.
8. We affirm that it is important for us all to listen to and learn from other religions so that we can value religious plurality as a factor that enriches our communities.
9. We endeavour to live out and explain the truths of our own religion in a manner that is intelligible and friendly to people of other faiths.
10. Cultural diversity as well as religious diversity in our communities will be affirmed as a source of enrichment and challenge.

Prepared by the Rt Rev. Kenneth Fernando for the Network of Interfaith Concerns of the Anglican Communion

Four Levels of Interreligious Dialogue

- 1 The dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joy and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- 2 The dialogue of action, in which persons of all religions collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
- 3 The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.
- 4 The dialogue of religious experience, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.

(M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999, pp. 95, 96



Five Types of Interreligious Dialogue

1. **Informational:** Acquiring of knowledge of the faith partner's religious history, founding, basic beliefs, scriptures, etc.
2. **Confessional:** Allowing the faith partners to speak for and define themselves in terms of what it means to live as an adherent.
3. **Experiential:** Dialogue with faith partners from within the partner's tradition, worship and ritual – entering into the feelings of one's partner and permitting that person's symbols and stories to guide.
4. **Relational:** Develop friendships with individual persons beyond the "business" of dialogue.
5. **Practical:** Collaborate to promote peace and justice.

Interfaith Lessons I Have Learned

James Fleming is an Irish, Roman Catholic priest with extensive experience in Muslim-Christian dialogue. Listed below are some of the learnings he has acquired in his more than 20 years of interfaith work:

1. **Relate** to others as equal partners in the search for truth
2. **Recognize** that listening as well as speaking is necessary for a genuine conversation. Remember the words of St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel always, and when necessary use words."
3. **Treasure** the sense of wonder that comes with encountering the new, the unusual and the surprising. Record such experiences in a journal if possible
4. **Be hungry** for knowledge about the other person's culture and religion. Learn to understand what others actually believe and value. And allow them to express their beliefs and values in their own terms. This does mean that we cannot, with experience and knowledge, challenge other people's cultural values
5. **Be honest** in sharing your beliefs and do not try to water them down to accommodate. Other people see through this and lose respect for you
6. **Do not misrepresent** or disparage other peoples' beliefs and practices
7. **Be aware** of your own need for ongoing conversion to your own professed beliefs. Remember, it is not our job to convert others to our beliefs, but to be faithful to our own
8. **Respond** to others as a gift, not as a threat
9. **Be sensitive** to vulnerable people and do not try to exploit them
10. **Remember** that it's our differences that can make a difference, so rejoice in the richness of our diversities

Ten Rules for Interfaith Dialogue

These clear and handy guidelines for interfaith etiquette emphasize values such as listening, respectful presence, flexibility and openness as well as the capacity for self-reflection and self-critique.

1. Have a good grasp of your own tradition - When engaging in dialogue a person needs to bring with them a deeply lived experience of their own tradition to be able to share its fruits with others.
2. Come to dialogue in order to learn and grow, not to change the other - Each person who enters into dialogue needs to come with an openness to learn and to change in their own attitudes and perceptions, not out of a desire to change the other. In this way, all those who participate will be changed in some way as a result of the dialogue.
3. Be willing also to help your own faith community to grow and change - Since dialogue is a corporate activity, it is necessary that each person enters into dialogue not only across faith lines but also with other members of their own faith community, to share with them the fruits of interfaith dialogue. In this way, the whole community can eventually learn and change, gaining ever more perceptive insight into reality.
4. Be honest and sincere and assume that others are equally honest and sincere - Real dialogue is built on mutuality and trust.
5. Respect the religious experience and identity of others and anticipate that they will do the same for you. - Each dialogue partner can best define what it means for them to be an authentic member of their own tradition. This does not preclude a person changing, deepening, expanding and modifying their self-definition and understanding as a result of dialogue. Conversely, the one interpreted should be able to recognize themselves in the interpretation of others.
6. Don't assume in advance where points of agreement or disagreement will exist - Listen with empathy and sympathy and avoid presumptions about what the other will say. See how much is held in common while maintaining the integrity of your own tradition. If there is a real point of disagreement, it needs to be respected. However, it may be at a different point than that which was originally expected.
7. Be prepared to participate in dialogue on an equal footing - Each partner needs to come prepared to learn from the other and to share their own understanding on an equal basis. There is no such thing as one-way dialogue.
8. Be self-reflective and prepared to critique your own tradition - In dialogue, a person needs to combine healthy self-criticism with an ability to hold to one's religious tradition with integrity and conviction. A lack of such self-criticism implies that one's own tradition already has all the correct answers and that one has nothing to learn. Such an attitude makes dialogue not only

unnecessary but almost impossible.

9. Strive to experience the other's faith 'from within' and be prepared to view yourself differently as a result of an 'outside' perspective - A religion is not merely something of the head, but also of the spirit, heart and 'whole being', individual and communal. John Dunne speaks of 'passing over' into another's religious experience and then coming back enlightened, broadened and deepened.
10. Try to be aware of the cultural conditioning and historical memory we bring to dialogue - In western culture, for example, we need to take account of the fact that we are heirs to the values of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Some participants in dialogue may come with painful memories of past injustices. It is important to be aware of how historical memory and cultural influences may impact on our dialogue.

Resources:

L. Swidler, 'The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, (20:1, Winter 1983.)

P. Cunningham and A. Starr (eds.), 'Sharing Shalom' — a process for interfaith dialogue

Rights, Responsibilities and Skills of Dialogue

In this chart, American interfaith educator, Patrice Brodeur, demonstrates that for true dialogue to occur, it needs to take place within a protective environment of mutually accepted rights and responsibilities, rooted in two fundamental values: respect for the human person and trust in the process of dialogue.

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By Patrice Brodeur

For true dialogue to occur it needs to take place within a protective environment of mutually accepted rights and responsibilities, rooted in two fundamental values: respect for the human person and trust in the process of dialogue. Dialogue works best when the participants are willing to develop certain skills that facilitate the process.

Five people from five different religious traditions explore their relations at this United Religions Initiative gathering.

Rights

1. Each person has the right to define him/herself without being labeled by others
2. Each person has the right to express his or her beliefs, ideas and feelings
3. Each person has the right to ask questions that help him/her understand what someone else has said
4. Each person has the right not to change or be forced to change
5. Each person has the right to expect that what is said will be held in confidence

Responsibilities

1. Each person must be willing to seriously question his/her assumptions about 'the other'
2. Each person must allow the same right of self-expression that s/he expects for him/herself
3. Each person should ask questions that respect the other's right of self-definition, even in times of conflict or disagreement
4. Each person must accept the others as equal partners in the dialogue, and acknowledge the dignity of the traditions represented
5. Each person must agree to hold what others say in confidence

Skills

1. Each person should be able to evaluate and articulate his/her own attitudes, values and positions on issues within the context of his/her tradition
2. Each person should learn how to be more sensitive to what the other is saying
3. Each person should learn how to respond to questions in ways that help others understand
4. Each person should learn to deal with different points of view while maintaining his/her own integrity
5. Each person should learn to deal with others from a position of mutual trust, based on an expectation that others come to the dialogue in a spirit of honesty and sincerity

Reprinted from "Description of the 'Guidelines for Interfaith Celebrations,'" in Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Vol. 34, number 4 (Fall 1997), pp. 559-560. The chart was the result of several years of dialogue among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim seminarians in a program entitled Seminarians Interacting, sponsored by the National Conference for Community and Justice.