

Principles and Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue

Understanding and Conversation



**We are grateful to Scarborough Foreign Mission Society for
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Guidelines for Interreligious Understanding

Fr. Thomas Keating is a Roman Catholic priest and Trappist Monk who has made a major contribution to the centering prayer movement and to Interfaith spirituality. He is convener of the Snowmass Conference and a member of the international monastic inter-religious movement. He authored the following report:

A report on an experience of on-going inter-religious dialogue might be helpful at this point. In 1984, I invited a group of spiritual teachers from a variety of the world religions — Buddhist, Tibetan Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Islamic, Native American, Russian Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic — to gather at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, to meditate together in silence and to share our personal spiritual journeys, especially those elements in our respective traditions that have proved most helpful to us along the way.

We kept no record and published no papers. As our trust and friendship grew, we felt moved to investigate various points that we seemed to agree on. The original points of agreement were worked over during the course of subsequent meetings as we continued to meet, for a week or so each year. Our most recent list consists of the following eight points:

1. The world religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality to which they give various names: Brahman, Allah, Absolute, God, Great Spirit.
2. Ultimate Reality cannot be limited by any name or concept.
3. Ultimate Reality is the ground of infinite potentiality and actualization.
4. Faith is opening, accepting and responding to Ultimate Reality. Faith in this sense precedes every belief system.
5. The potential for human wholeness (or in other frames of reference) — enlightenment, salvation, transformation, blessedness, “nirvana” — is present in every human person.
6. Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices but also through nature, art, human relationships, and service of others.
7. As long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering.
8. Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life; yet spiritual attainment is not the result of one's own efforts, but the result of the experience of oneness with Ultimate Reality.

Points of Agreement or Similarity

At the annual Snowmass conference in May 1986, we came up with additional points of agreement of a practical nature:

A. Some examples of disciplined practice, common to us all:

- A Practice of compassion
- B Service to others
- C Practicing moral precepts and virtues
- D Training in meditation techniques and regularity of practice
- E Attention to diet and exercise

- F Fasting and abstinence
- G The use of music and chanting and sacred symbols
- H Practice in awareness (recollection, mindfulness) and living in the present moment
- I Pilgrimage
- J Study of scriptural texts and scriptures

And in some traditions:

- 1 Relationship with a qualified teacher
- 2 Repetition of sacred words (mantra, japa)
- 3 Observance of periods of silence and solitude
- 4 Movement and dance
- 5 Formation of community

B. It is essential to extend our formal practice of awareness into all aspects of our life.

C. Humility, gratitude, and a sense of humor are indispensable in the spiritual life.

D. Prayer is communion with Ultimate Reality, whether it is regarded as personal, impersonal, or beyond them both.

We were surprised and delighted to find so many points of similarity and convergence in our respective paths. Like most people of our time, we originally expected that we would find practically nothing in common. In the years that followed, we spontaneously and somewhat hesitatingly began to take a closer look at certain points of disagreement until these became our main focus of attention. We found that discussing our points of disagreement increased the bonding of the group even more than discovering our points of agreement. We became more honest in stating frankly what we believed and why, without at the same time making any effort to convince others of our own position. We simply presented our understanding as a gift to the group.

Essentials for Formatting a Mission Statement for Interfaith Studies at The University or College Level

By Dr. Nathan Kollar

1. Interfaith dialogue deals with religions individually and comparatively from the perspective of diverse fields of study such as sociology, political science, literature, theology, and religious studies. It is interdisciplinary.
2. Its purpose is to bring individuals and institutions together in conversation for mutual understanding and action to benefit the common good of which knowledge, peace, and empathy for each other are of primary importance.
3. At a minimum, it studies and seeks to understand this purpose through all the disciplines that now study religion and religions, while hoping to develop new methods of research and bodies of knowledge unique to interfaith to implement this seeking.
4. In such study the acquisition of factual knowledge of religions includes the admission of mystery and paradox as inherent to our understanding of religions in general and each religion in particular.
5. It accepts change as inherent in all religious manifestations and seeks to identify religious change as it occurs within individuals and religious communities.
6. The recognition of equality among all and empathy for all are both necessary and advocated in all religious encounters titled interfaith. This is not an advocacy of easy relativism, for it recognizes, as David Tracy has said: "Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it." (Quoted from *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, by David Tracy, [Chicago: University of Chicago; San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987], p. 19.)
7. It recognizes and accepts the need for accountability in the manner in which it describes the various religions as well as the content of each description.
8. It is distinguished from other disciplines by its necessary inclusion of the primacy of mystery, paradox, and empathy in its selection, dissemination, and interchanges of information and by methodologies particular to its field of study.

The above mission statement is excerpted with permission from an article entitled, ***The Interfaith Movement in a Liminal Age: The Institutionalization of a Movement***, by Dr. Nathan R. Kollar. To read the entire article, click here:

<https://www.scarboromissions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Interfaith-movement.pdf>

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The Language of Interfaith Conversation

In this article, Canadian multifaith educator, JW Windland, argues that a sensitive use of interfaith language expresses our common humanity, builds relationships of respect and trust, and pursues peace.

The journey into interfaith conversation is not unlike a journey around the world. Instantly we are connected with diverse cultures, customs and concepts. Just as when visiting distant lands we may pick up a phrase book to learn how to facilitate basic communication, a simple phrase book for interfaith conversation may be helpful. The following is not so much a Glossary of Interfaith Words but rather possible chapter headings if such a book actually existed.

Mindful Vocabulary

One parlance of interfaith language is Mindful Vocabulary. A church is not a synagogue. A synagogue is not a masjid (mosque). A masjid is not a gurdwara (Sikh house of worship). Using the correct term indicates that you have taken the time to become at least basically aware of the conversation partner's faith tradition. But interfaith language can be very confusing. Perhaps instead of faith-specific terms, faith-neutral terms may serve better. For example, "house of worship" is a term that fits most traditions and communicates what you intend to say without calling an apple an orange. Because some traditions such as Native spirituality or Baha'i do not necessarily have a traditional "house" of worship, the term "place of worship" may be even more suitable. Developing a type of informal, all-purpose Interfaith Glossary is a helpful exercise that heightens an awareness of the words we use and dissolves the presumption that "everyone is just like me."

Mindful Respect

A second suggestion for interfaith conversation is the language of Mindful Respect. Learning simple greetings is an expression of respect and honour for another's tradition and culture. Examples include *Namaste* (Hinduism), *Shalom* (Judaism), *Asalaam Alaikum* (Islam), *Sat Sri Akaal* (Sikhism). You'll find diverse greetings interesting to learn and fun to use. Mindful respect in interfaith conversation is not only about what you might want to say but also what you might not want to say. Avoiding offensive or judgmental terms requires the language of mindful respect. Instead of referring to a particular ritual or event as "strange" or "weird," use terms like "unfamiliar to me" or "different than I have seen before." Using the language of mindful respect communicates a sense of dignity and worth toward the dialogue partner.

Insider-Outsider Language

A third suggestion for interfaith conversation is Mindful Use of Insider/Outsider Language. Every faith tradition has its own lexicon. Sikhs know well what is meant by kangha, Muslims know wudu, Buddhists know tanha, Jews know aliyah. However, each faith tradition may be unfamiliar with the language of the others. In order to be understood in interfaith conversations, it helps to be mindful that you are speaking to an "outsider" who may not know your faith's vocabulary. Using straightforward outsider definitions: "small wooden comb" (*kangha*), "ritual washing" (*wudu*), "selfish

craving" (*tanha*), "going up to read the Torah" (*aliyah*) insures that you will more likely understand as well as be understood.

Gentle Commitment

A fourth suggestion for interfaith language is Mindful Gentle Commitment. Interfaith conversation does not mean hiding or temporizing one's own strongly held beliefs. Indeed the best interfaith conversation is between faithful commitments. It is often through the shared commitments of dialogue partners that beliefs are mutually enhanced and enriched. Such sharing can be done – indeed, must be done – in the language of gentleness that is not exclusive, arrogant or patronizing. When a Jew proclaims that the messiah has not yet come, a Christian will disagree; when a Christian proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, a Muslim will disagree; when a Muslim proclaims that Mohammed is the seal of the prophets, a Mormon will disagree; and on and on.

The language of interfaith conversation calls us to be mindful that our commitments are just that, *our* commitments, and not the commitments of others. We share commitments so that we may understand one another, not that we may convince or convert one another. Perhaps two helpful words to add to our interfaith phrase book are "*for me.*" The messiah has not yet come, for me. Jesus is the Christ, for me. Mohammed is the seal of the prophet, for me. The language of gentle commitment in interfaith sharing clarifies other people's beliefs as well as our own.

Interfaith language, like any other language, includes both speaking and understanding. A more mindful language is just one of many tools to make this possible. As you engage in interfaith conversation you will no doubt think of many other chapter headings for a phrase book of mindful interfaith language. Such language expresses our common humanity, promotes civility and builds relationships of mutual respect and trust. Such language pursues peace.