

Principles and Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue

What Is Dialogue?



**We are grateful to Scarborough Foreign Mission Society for
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Contents

Assisi Decalogue For Peace	2
The Seven Staged of Deep-Dialogue	3-4
Dialogue vs Debate	5
Dialogue Is Not Debate	6

Assisi Decalogue for Peace

During the interfaith prayer service at Assisi (2002), ten of the 200 faith representatives each read one of the following ten commitments in their own language. In March, Pope John Paul II sent a copy of the Decalogue for Peace to all heads of state. In an accompanying letter, the Pope stated that the participants at the Assisi gathering were inspired more than ever by one common conviction — humanity must choose between love and hatred.

1. We commit ourselves to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are opposed to all true religious spirit and we condemn all recourse to violence and war in the name of God or religion. We undertake to do everything possible to eradicate the causes of terrorism.
2. We commit ourselves to educate people about respect and mutual esteem in order to achieve peaceful coexistence and solidarity among members of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions.
3. We commit ourselves to promote the culture of dialogue so that understanding and trust may develop among individuals and peoples as these are the conditions of authentic peace.
4. We commit ourselves to defend the right of all human beings to lead a dignified life, in accordance with their cultural identity.
5. We commit ourselves to engage in dialogue with sincerity and patience, without considering what separates us as an insurmountable wall, on the contrary, recognizing that facing our differences can become an occasion for greater reciprocal understanding.
6. We commit ourselves to pardon each other's errors and prejudices of the past and present, and to support one another in the common struggle against egoism and abuses, hatred and violence, and in order to learn from the past that peace without justice is not true peace.
7. We commit ourselves to stand at the side of those who suffer poverty and abandonment, speaking out for those who have no voice and taking concrete action to overcome such situations, in the conviction that no one can be happy alone.
8. We commit ourselves to make our own the cry of those who do not surrender to violence and evil, and we wish to contribute with all our strength to give a real hope of justice and peace to the humanity of our time.
9. We commit ourselves to encourage all initiatives that promote friendship between peoples, in the conviction that, if a solid understanding between peoples is lacking, technological progress exposes the world to increasing dangers of destruction and death.
10. We commit ourselves to ask the leaders of nations to make every possible effort so as to build, at both national and international levels, a world of solidarity and peace founded on justice.

The Seven Stages of Deep-Dialogue

By Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler

Outlined below are seven stages that many people experience in the process of dialogue with other religions and cultures.

Stage One Radical Encountering of Difference

Early encounters with those of other religions are inherently challenging and even threatening as I face a new worldview, a new way of interpreting reality, and new ways of responding that are clearly other. I am tempted to appropriate the other to my own worldview. I soon realize that this disruption to my worldview and ways of responding won't go away, nor will it accommodate my own worldview and ways of responding. I may be tempted to withdraw from the situation, only to discover that my place in society may not allow for such withdrawal. The decision to proceed moves me on into the second stage.

Stage Two Crossing Over — Letting Go and Entering the World of the Other

As I make the decision to engage the world of the other sincerely, I find myself called to explore, to learn anew, and to reassess my norms regarding adequate and appropriate expressions of values, and to critique my traditional attitudes. I find that I need to approach the new worldview with openness and a bracketing of my stereotypes and prejudices. As I do this, I find myself moving into stage three.

Stage Three Inhabiting and Experiencing the World of the Other

The experience of empathy and interest then expands into a sense of freedom that opens doors to learn many things from this other world: what is of greatest importance, modalities of interaction, what causes suffering to those in this world. As I experiment with integrating ways of thinking and acting in light of my discoveries, I sense an excitement and a deepening relationship with those of this world. At a certain point, after I have gained some competence in negotiating this environment, I discover that this is not my true home. This moves me into the fourth stage.

Stage Four Crossing Back with an Expanded Vision

The new knowledge I have gained in alternative ways of thinking and acting is now part of my repertoire as I regain my sense of belonging in my own world. I am able to think and act from both perspectives as the context may require. My own sense of identity has deepened, has changed, and no matter what choices I freely make to believe and to act, I can no longer assume that my former unilateral way of being in the world is the only way. My attitudes and concerns are irrevocably reshaped to hold the other in view, in relationship. This moves me into stage five.

Stage Five The Dialogic Awakening — A Radical Paradigm Shift

I experience a profound shift in my worldview as well as expanded consciousness of concerns and needs and causes of dysfunction in world realities and viable ways of human response. I can no longer

return to my former worldview that did not have a place for this other. Further, I am irrevocably shaped to the possibility that there is a plurality of viable worldviews, concerns, and human responses. This changes my sense of myself. I become aware of the interconnectedness of myself and many/all others, including Earth and all her needs and potentials. This awakening is what moves me into the sixth stage.

Stage Six Global Awakening — The Paradigm Shift Matures

This stage of Deep-Dialogue opens me to the common ground that underlies the multiple worlds with which I am surrounded. I can perceive that the unique differences essential to these worlds are contained in a field of unity. My own inner world is now apparent as a range of perspectives and unique to myself. I am increasingly open to dialogue with others in my various communities of life, to a transformed relationship with them and an embrace of the context in which these communities are situated. There is for me an expanding world of communities of life with greater potential for ongoing dialogue, new learning, and deepened relationships. This moves me to stage seven.

Stage Seven Personal and Global Transforming of Life and Behaviour

One of the most significant transformations that has taken place on this journey is a greater and more encompassing moral consciousness and ensuing practice. The communion that I experience with all — self, others, and the Earth — is profound. I sense that my care for myself, instead of being in competition with concerns for the welfare of other realities, is integral to the care of the whole. As I come to deeper self-realization and greater self-fulfillment, I experience deeper meaning in relationships and in my whole life.

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Dialogue vs Debate

Dialogue

- *Dialogue is the understanding of myself and others.*
- I listen openly and compassionately with the view that I want to understand.
- I listen for strengths, so I can affirm and learn, and to hear other viewpoints.
- I speak for myself using my own experiences and understanding, and examine my own assumptions
- I ask questions to increase understanding, and am willing to temporarily suspend my beliefs.
- I allow others to complete their communications.
- I concentrate on others' words, feelings, body language, and other modes of communication.
- I respect others' experiences as true and valid for them, and want to work with others to come to new understandings.
- I respect the expression of feelings in myself and others.
- I honor silence.
- I look for ways to keep the conversation going, even in conflict.

Debate

- *Debate is the successful argument of my position over that of an opponent.*
- I listen in order to counter what I hear, and am closed to new ideas.
- I listen for weakness, so I can discount and devalue what I hear.
- I speak based on my own assumptions about others' experiences and motives, in an effort to prove that I am right.
- I ask questions in order to control the conversation, or to confuse: I look for ways to affirm my own beliefs or "win."
- I interrupt or change the subject.
- I focus on the point I want to make next.
- I critique others' experiences as distorted or invalid or wrong.
- I distrust the expression of feelings as manipulative or less than legitimate.
- I am anxious in silence or use it to gain advantage.
- I look for ways to end the conversation, when I am uncomfortable.

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Dialogue Is Not Debate

Debate is oppositional: two or more sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong. Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward a common understanding.

In debate one searches for the other positions flaws and weaknesses. In dialogue one searches for strengths in the other position.

Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right. Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude, an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.

In debate winning is the goal. In dialogue finding common ground is the goal.

Debate defends one's position as the best solution and excludes other positions. Dialogue opens up the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.

Debate assumes there is a right answer and that someone has it. Dialogue assumes many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.

Debate implies conclusion. Dialogue remains open-ended.

