

What Is Dialogue?

Today when we speak of dialogue between religions or ideologies, we mean something quite definite, namely, a two-way communication between persons; one-way lecturing or speaking is obviously not dialogue. However, there are many different kinds of two-way communication, for example, fighting, wrangling, debating, etc. Clearly none of these are dialogue. On the other extreme is the communication between persons who hold precisely the same views on a particular subject. We also do not mean this when we use the term dialogue; rather, we might call that something like encouragement, reinforcement—but certainly not dialogue. Now if we look at these two opposite kinds of two-way communication which are *not* meant by the word dialogue, we can learn quite precisely what we do in fact mean when we use the term dialogue.

Looking at the last example first—the principle underlying “reinforcement” is the assumption that both sides have a total grasp on the truth of the subject and hence simply need to be supported in their commitment to it. Since this example and the principle underlying it are excluded from the meaning of dialogue, clearly dialogue must include the notion that neither side has a total grasp of the truth of the subject, but that both need to seek further.

The principle underlying “debating” in the second example is the assumption that one side has all the truth concerning the subject and that the other side needs to be informed or convinced of it. Since that example also and its principle are excluded from the meaning of dialogue, this clearly implies that dialogue means that no one side has a monopoly on the truth on the subject, but both need to seek further.

It may turn out in some instances, of course, that after a more or less extensive dialogue, it is learned that the two sides in fact agree completely on the subject discussed. Naturally, such a discovery does not mean that the

encounter was a non-dialogue, but rather that the dialogue was the means of learning the new truth that both sides agreed on the subject. To continue from that point on, however, to speak only about the area of agreement, would then be to move from dialogue to reinforcement.

Hence, to express at least the initial part of the meaning of dialogue positively: 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 one another.

This analysis may seem obvious and hence superfluous. But we believe not. Dialogue has become a faddish term and is sometimes, like charity, used to cover a multitude of sins. Sometimes, for example, it is used by those who are quite convinced that they have all the truth on a subject, but feel that in today's climate with "dialogue" in vogue, a less aggressive style will be more effective in communicating to the "ignorant" the truth that they already possess in full. Therefore, while their encounters with others still rely on the older non-dialogue principle—that they have all the truth on a subject—their less importuning approach will now be called "dialogue." This type of use would appear to be merely an opportunistic manipulation of the term dialogue.

Maybe some of those people, however, truly believe that they are engaging in dialogue when they employ such a "soft sell" approach and encourage their interlocutors to also express their own views on the subject—even though it is known ahead of time, of course, that they are false—for such a "dialogue" may well make the ignorant person more open to receiving the truth that the one side knows it already has. In that situation, the "truth-holders" simply had a basic misunderstanding of the term dialogue and mistakenly called their convert-making "dialogue." Therefore, the above clarification is important.

In this context, we are 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 understood as an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life and how to live accordingly, 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 developments that have contributed to the rise of dialogue, for example, growth in mass education, communications, and travel, a world economy, threatening 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 simply 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 just possible, but necessary.

Whereas the understanding of truth in the West was largely absolute, static, monologic, or exclusive up to the nineteenth century, it has subsequently become de-absolutized, dynamic, and dialogic—in a word relational. This relatively new view of truth came about in at least six different but closely related ways.

1. Until the nineteenth century in Europe, truth (a statement about reality) was conceived in an absolute, static, exclusivistic either-or manner. It was believed that if a statement was true at one time, it would remain true, and not only in the sense of statements about empirical facts but also in the sense of statements about the meanings of things. Such is a classicist or absolutist view of truth.
2. Then, in the nineteenth century, scholars came to perceive all statements about the meaning of something as being partially products of their historical circumstances. Only by placing truth statements in their historical situations, their historical *Sitz im Leben*, could they be properly understood. A text could be understood only in context. Therefore, all statements about the meaning of things were seen to be de-absolutized in terms of time. Such is a historical view of truth.
3. Later on it was noted that we ask questions so as to obtain the knowledge and truth according to which we want to live. This is a praxis or intentional view of truth, that is, a statement has to be understood in relationship to the action-oriented intention of the thinker.

4. Early in the twentieth century, Karl Mannheim developed what he called the sociology of knowledge, which points out that every statement about truth and meaning is perspectival because all reality is perceived and spoken of from the cultural, class, sexual, and so forth, perspective of the perceiver. Such is a perspectival view of truth.
5. A number of thinkers, and most especially Ludwig Wittgenstein, have discovered something of the limitations of human language. Every description of reality is necessarily only partial, for although reality can be seen from an almost limitless number of perspectives, human language can express things from only one perspective at once. This partial and limited quality of all language is necessarily greatly intensified when one attempts to speak of the transcendent, which by definition “goes-beyond.” Such is a language-limited view of truth.
6. The contemporary discipline of hermeneutics stresses that all knowledge is interpreted knowledge. This means that in all knowledge “I” come to know something; the object comes into me in a certain way, namely, through the lens that I use to perceive it. As Thomas Aquinas wrote, “Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower.”¹ Such is an interpretative view of truth.
7. Further yet, reality can “speak” to me only with the language that I give it. The “answers” that I receive back from reality will always be in the language, the thought categories, of the questions I put to it. If and when the answers I receive are sometimes confused and unsatisfying, I probably need to learn to speak a more appropriate language when I put questions to reality. For example, if I ask the question: “How heavy is green?” of course I will receive a nonsense answer. Or if I ask questions about living things in mechanical categories, I will receive confusing and unsatisfying answers. I will likewise receive confusing and unsatisfying answers to questions about human sexuality if I use categories that are solely physical-biological. Witness the absurdity of the answer that birth control is forbidden by the natural law—the question falsely assumes that the nature of humanity is merely physical-biological. Such an understanding of truth is a dialogic understanding.²

In brief, our understanding of truth and reality has been undergoing a radical shift. The new paradigm understands all statements about reality, espe-

cially about the meaning of things, to be historical, praxial or intentional, perspectival, language-limited or partial, interpretive, and dialogic. Our understanding of truth statements, in short, has become “de-absolutized”—it has become “relational.” All statements about reality are now seen to be related to the historical context, praxis intentionality, perspective, etc., of the speaker, and in that sense are no longer “absolute.” Therefore, if my perception and description of the world is true only in a limited sense, that is, only as seen from my place in the world, 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.

Seven Views of “Truth”

1. **Classicist/absolutist:** Truth is static, unchanging, absolute, and universal. (What was true in Africa in 1000 BCE is true in North America in 2007.)
2. **Historical:** Truth claims are time-bound; awareness of what is true changes through history.
3. **Praxis/intentional:** The intentions and goals of truth-seekers influence what they identify as truth.
4. **Perspectival:** All truth claims reflect the unique perspectives of people: their culture, class, race, sex, etc.
5. **Language-limited:** Words used to describe truth are necessarily partial; our language limits our conversations about truth.
6. **Interpretive:** Everyone filters “the truth” and interprets it; no statements about truth exist apart from such interpretation.
7. **Dialogic:** Since truth claims are limited and perspectival, truth-seeking happens best when people engage in open dialogue with others who together seek closer approximations of the truth.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. In light of these seven views of truth, how would you describe your own approach to truth-seeking?
2. Is dialogue, in your opinion, a rejection of “truth” or a doorway into truth?
3. How would you define dialogue in your own words?

Who Should Dialogue

One important question is, who can, who should, engage in interreligious, interideological dialogue? There is clearly a fundamental communal aspect to such a dialogue. For example, if a person is neither a Lutheran nor a Jew, he or she could not engage in a specifically Lutheran-Jewish dialogue. Likewise, persons not belonging to any religious or ideological community could not, of course, engage in interreligious, interideological dialogue. They might of course engage in meaningful religious or ideological dialogue, but it simply would not be interreligious, interideological, between religions or ideologies.

Who then would qualify as a member of a religious community? If the question is of the official representation of a community at a dialogue, the clear answer is those who are appointed by the appropriate official body in that community: the congregation, Bet Din, roshi, bishop, Central Committee or whatever. However, if it is not a case of official representation, general reputation is usually the criteria. Some persons' qualifications, however, can be challenged by elements within a community, even very important official elements. The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, for example, has declared that Professors Hans Küng, Charles Curran, and Roger Haight are no longer to be considered Catholic theologians. In all three cases, however, hundreds of Catholic theologians subsequently stated publicly in writing that they were indeed still Catholic theologians.

In the end, however, it seems best to follow the principle that each person should decide for himself or herself whether or not they are members of a religious community. Extraordinary cases may at rare times present initial anomalies, but they inevitably will resolve themselves. Furthermore, it *is* important to be aware that, especially in the initial stages of any interreligious, interideological dialogue, it is very likely that the literally ec-centric members of religious, ideological communities will be the ones who will have the interest and ability to enter into dialogue. The more centrist persons will do so only after the dialogue has been proved safe for the mainline, official elements to venture into.

It is important to note that interreligious, interideological dialogue is not limited to official representatives of communities. Actually the great majority of the vast amount of such dialogue, particularly in the past four decades, has not been carried on by official representatives, although that too has been happening with increasing frequency.

What is needed then is 1) an openness to learn from the other, 2) knowledge of one's own tradition, and 3) a similarly disposed and knowledgeable dialogue partner from the other tradition. This can happen on almost any level of knowledge and education. The key is the openness to learn from the other. Naturally no one's knowledge of his or her own tradition can ever be complete; each person must continually learn more about it. One merely needs to realize that one's knowledge is in fact limited and know where to turn to gain the information needed. It is also important, however, that the dialogue partners be more or less equal in knowledge of their own traditions. The larger the asymmetry is, the less the communication will be two-way or dialogic.

Hence, it is important that interreligious, interideological dialogue *not* be limited to official representatives or even to the experts in the various traditions, although they both have their irreplaceable roles to play in the dialogue. Dialogue should involve every level of religious and ideological communities, all the way down to the "persons in the pews." Only in this way will the religious, ideological communities learn from one another and come to understand one another as they truly are.

The Catholic bishops of the world expressed this insight very clearly and vigorously at the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) when they "exhorted *all the Catholic faithful* to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism [dialogue among the Christian churches, and in an extended understanding, dialogue among the religions and ideologies, as is made clear by other Vatican II documents and the establishment of permanent Vatican Secretariats for dialogue with non-Christians and with non-Believers]." Not being content with this exhortation, the bishops went on to say that, "in ecumenical work, [all] Catholics must...make the *first approaches* toward them [non-Catholics]." In case there were some opaque minds or recalcitrant wills out there, the bishops once more made it clear that ecumenism [interreligious, interideological dialogue] "involves the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone, according to the talent of each" (Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism*, 4,5). Certainly this insight is not to be limited to the one billion-plus Catholics in the world—and the further billions they directly or indirectly influence—massive and important as that group may be.

However, what about the challenge of those who charge that "dialogists" are really elitists because they define dialogue in such a liberal manner that only like-minded liberals can join in? In fact, only those who have a "de-absolu-

tized” understanding of truth will be able or even want to enter into dialogue. Put in other words, only those who understand all truth statements, that is, all statements about reality, to be always limited in a variety of ways and in that sense not absolute (the word comes from the Latin *ab-solvere*, “un-limited”), can enter into dialogue. This, however, is no elitist discrimination against “absolutists” or fundamentalists by not allowing them to engage in dialogue. Such a charge would simply be another case of not understanding what dialogue is: a two-way communication so that both sides can learn. If one partner grants that it has something to learn from the other, that admission presupposes that the first partner has only a limited—a de-absolutized—grasp of truth concerning the subject. If one partner thinks that it has an absolute grasp of the truth concerning the subject, it obviously believes that it has nothing to learn from the other, and hence the encounter will not be a dialogue but some kind of attempt at one-way teaching or a debate. Thus the partner with the absolutized view of truth will not only not be able to engage in dialogue, it will very much not want to—unless it falls into the category either of harboring the earlier described misunderstanding of the meaning of dialogue or the intention of an opportunistic manipulation of the term.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. The authors point out that beginning in particular with Vatican Council II (1962–65), Catholic leaders have been strong advocates of interreligious dialogue. How clearly and forcefully has that message been communicated to you from your religious leaders?
2. In your experience, how clearly has the call to engage in interreligious dialogue filtered down to the average member of your religious community?
3. Do you feel that you know your own tradition well enough to dialogue about it? Why or why not?
4. What might motivate someone to reject dialogue? How would you address his or her concerns?

Kinds of Dialogue

In the question of what constitutes interreligious, interideological dialogue, it is important to notice that we normally mean a two-way communication in ideas and words. At times, however, we give the term an extended meaning of

Interreligious dialogue leads to...

1. New information about others
2. Expanded understanding of ourselves
3. Changes in attitudes and perspective
4. Behavioral change

joint action or collaboration and joint prayer or sharing of the spiritual or depth dimension of our tradition. While the intellectual and verbal communication is indeed the primary meaning of dialogue, if the results therefrom do not spill over into the other two areas of action and spirituality, it will have proved sterile.

Beyond that it can lead toward a kind of schizophrenia and even hypocrisy.

On the positive side, serious involvement in joint action and/or spirituality will tend to challenge previously-held intellectual positions and lead to dialogue in the cognitive field. Catholic and Protestant clergy, for example, who found themselves together in the Nazi Concentration Camp in Dachau because of joint resistance to Nazi actions 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 officially to embrace ecumenism and interreligious dialogue after many centuries of vigorous official rejection.³

Because religion is not something just of the head and the hands, but also of the heart—of the whole human being—our encounter with our partner must also eventually include the depth or spiritual dimension. This spiritual or depth dimension engages our emotions, our imagination, our intuitive consciousness. If we do not come to know each other in this deepest dimension of ourselves, our dialogue will remain relatively superficial. The technique called by John Dunne “crossing over” can be of help here. Through it we focus on a central image, metaphor, from our partner’s spiritual life and let it work on our imagination, our emotions, evoking whatever responses it may, leading us to different feelings. We then return to our own inner world enriched, expanded, with a deeper sympathy for and sensitivity to our partner’s inner world. Within the context of this expanded inner dimension, we will be prompted to look thereafter for new cognitive articulations adequate to reflect it, and we will be prompted to express our new awareness and understanding of our partner’s religious reality in appropriate action.

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, the other side must teach, and thus both learning and teaching occur. We know, however, that if each side comes primarily to teach, both sides will tend to close up and as a result neither teaching nor learning takes place.

We naturally gradually learn more and more about our partners in the dialogue and in the process also shuck off the misinformation about them we may have had. However, we also learn something more, something even closer to home. Our dialogue partner likewise becomes for us something of a mirror in which we perceive ourselves in ways we otherwise could not. In the very process of responding to the questions of our partners we look into our inner selves and into our traditions in ways that we perhaps never would have, and thus come to know ourselves as we could not have outside the dialogue.

In addition, in listening to our partners' descriptions of their perceptions of us, we learn much about "how we are in the world." Because no one is simply in himself or herself, but is always in relationship to others, "how we are in the world," how we relate to and impact others, is in fact part of our reality, is part of us. As an example, it is only by being in dialogue with another culture that we really come to know our own. I became aware of my particular American culture, for example, only as I lived in Europe for a number of years. I became conscious of American culture as such with its similarities to and differences from the European only in the mirror of my dialogue partner of European culture.

This expanded knowledge of ourselves and of the other that we gain in dialogue 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 toward ourselves and others change, and thus our behavior as well. Once again, to the extent that this inner and outer change,

this transformation, does not take place, to that extent we tend toward schizophrenia and hypocrisy. Whether one wants to speak of dialogue and then of the subsequent transformation as “beyond dialogue,” as John Cobb does in his book *Beyond Dialogue*, or speak of transformation as an integral part of the continuing dialogue process, as Klaus Klostermeier does (*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 21, 4 [Fall, 1984], pp. 755–59), need not detain us here. What is important is to see that the chain of dialogue-knowledge-change must not be broken. If the final link, change, falls away, the authenticity of the second, knowledge, and the first, dialogue, are called into question. To repeat: The goal of dialogue is for “each side to learn and change accordingly.”

There are likewise communal goals in interreligious, interideological dialogue. Some of these will be special to the situation of the particular dialogue partners. Several Christian churches, for example, may enter into dialogue with the goal of structural union. Such union goals, however, will be something particular to religious communities *within* one religion, that is, within Christianity, within Buddhism, within Islam, etc. Dialogue *between* different religions and ideologies will not have this structural union goal. Rather, it will seek first of all to know the dialogue partners as accurately as possible and try to understand them as sympathetically as possible. Dialogue will seek to learn what the partners’ commonalities and differences are.

There is a simple technique to learn where the authentic commonalities and differences are between two religions or ideologies: Attempt to agree with the dialogue partner as far as possible on a subject without violating one’s own integrity; where one can go no further, that is where the authentic difference is and what has been shared up until that point are commonalities. Experience informs us that very often our true differences lie elsewhere than we had believed before the dialogue.

One communal goal in looking to learn the commonalities and differences two religions hold is to bridge over antipathies and misunderstandings—to draw closer together in thought, feeling, and action on the basis of commonalities held. This goal, however, can be reached only if another principle is also observed: interreligious, interideological dialogue must be a two-sided dialogue—across the communal divide and within it. We need to be in regular dialogue with our fellow religionists, sharing with them the results of our interreligious, interideological dialogue so they too can enhance their understanding of what is held in common and where the differences truly are. Only

thus can both communities grow in knowledge and inner and outer transformation and thereby bridge antipathies and draw closer. Further, if this two-sided dialogue is not maintained, the individual dialogue partners alone will grow in knowledge and experience the resultant transformation, thus slowly moving away from their unchanging community, thereby becoming a third reality, a *tertium quid*—hardly the intended integrative goal of dialogue.

It is important to learn 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 beforehand; we will thus be drawn together in greater harmony. It is also important that we learn more comprehensively what our differences are. Such differences may be 1) complementary, as for example, emphasis 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, but here we can note that the differences in the first two categories are not simply to be perceived and acknowledged; they should in fact be cherished and celebrated both for their own sakes and because by discerning them we have extended our own understanding of reality and how to live accordingly—the primary goal of dialogue.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Education implies openness to growth and change. Otherwise, what's the point of investing time and money in it? Is the same true of engaging in interreligious dialogue?
2. Should people who enter into dialogue expect their beliefs, viewpoints, and knowledge to change?
3. How do you feel about that prospect in your own dialogue?

The Means of Dialogue

A great variety of means and techniques of dialogue have been successfully used and doubtless some are yet to be developed. The overall guiding principle in this issue, however, should be to use our creative imaginations and our

sensitivity for persons. 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. Whenever something more formal than a personal conversation is planned, all the traditions to be engaged in the dialogue should be involved in its initial planning. This is particularly true when different communities first begin to encounter one another. Then dialogue on the potential dialogue itself becomes an essential part of the dialogic encounter.

In the first encounters between communities, the most difficult points of differences should not be tackled. Rather, those subjects which show promise of highlighting commonalities should be treated first so that mutual trust between the partners can be established and developed. Without mutual trust, there will be no dialogue.

Vital to the development of this needed mutual trust is that each partner come to the dialogue with total sincerity and honesty. My partners in dialogue wish to learn to know me and my tradition as we truly are; this is impossible if I am not totally sincere and honest. The same is true for my dialogue partners; I cannot learn to know them and their traditions truly if they are not completely sincere and honest. We must simultaneously presume total sincerity and honesty in our partners as well as practice these virtues ourselves, otherwise there will be no trust.

Care must also be taken in dialogue 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 of course we will learn nothing—a total defeat of the purpose of dialogue.

Each partner in the dialogue must define himself or herself; only a Muslim, for example, can know from the inside what it means to be a Muslim, and this self-understanding will change, grow, expand, deepen as the dialogue develops, and can be accurately described only by the one experiencing the living, growing religious reality. Each partner needs to come to the dialogue with no fixed assumptions as to where the authentic differences between the traditions are, but 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. Of course, only equals can engage in full authentic dialogue; the degree of equality will determine the degree of

two-way communication, that is, the degree of dialogue experienced. A “safe space” may have to be provided for an “unequal” partner to be able to engage in dialogue.

An indispensable major means of dialogue is a self-critical attitude toward ourselves and our tradition. If we are not willing to look self-critically at our own and *our tradition's* position on a subject, the implication clearly is that we have nothing to learn from our partner. If that is the case, we are not interested in dialogue—whose primary purpose is to learn from our partner. To be certain, we come to the dialogue as a Buddhist, as a Christian, as a Marxist, etc., with sincerity, honesty, and integrity. Self-criticism, however, does not mean a lack of sincerity, honesty, integrity. Indeed, a lack of self-criticism will mean there is no valid sincerity, no real honesty, no authentic integrity.

Finally, the most fundamental means to dialogue is having a correct understanding of dialogue, which is a two-way communication so that both partners can learn from each other, and change accordingly. If this basic goal is kept fixed in view and acted on with imagination, creative and fruitful dialogue—and a growing transformation of each participant's life and that of their communities—will follow. (See Chapter Two: The Dialogue Decalogue.)

The Subject of Dialogue

We have already spoken about first choosing subjects that promise to yield a high degree of common ground so as to establish and develop mutual trust. Let's now look at the three main areas of dialogue: the cognitive, the active, and the spiritual.

In some ways the last, the spiritual area, would seem to be the most attractive, at least to those with a more interior, mystical, psychological bent. Moreover it offers a greater 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 like Neoplatonism. 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 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; *halakhah* 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. Such an interpretation of religion or ideology is called theocentric.

Attractive as is theocentrism, one must be cautious not to wave 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 excluding non-theists from the dialogue. This would exclude not only atheistic Humanists and Marxists, but also non-theistic Theravada Buddhists, who do not deny the existence of God but rather understand ultimate reality in a non-theistic, non-personal 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, holy life; similarly, *soteria* in Greek), as what all humans have in common in the “spiritual” area, theists and non-theists alike. As a result, we can speak of a soterio-centrism.

In the active area dialogue has to take place in a fundamental way on the underlying principles for action which motivate each tradition. Once again, many similarities will be found, but also differences, which 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 ethical 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, medical ethics, can become the focus of interreligious, interideological dialogue—and ultimately joint action where it has been found congruent with each tradition’s principles and warranted in the concrete circumstances.

It is, however, in the cognitive area where the range of possible subjects is greatest. It is almost unlimited—remembering the caution that the less difficult topics be chosen first and the more difficult later. However, every dialogue group should be encouraged to follow creatively its own inner instincts and interests. Some groups, of course, 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.

Encouragement can be drawn here from the Vatican Curia (for some, an unexpected source). The Secretariat for Dialogue with Unbelievers wrote that even “doctrinal dialogue should be initiated with courage and sincerity, with the greatest freedom and with reverence.” It then went further to make a statement that is mind-jarring in its liberality: “Doctrinal discussion requires perceptiveness, both in honestly setting out one’s own opinion and in recognizing the truth everywhere, even if the truth demolishes one so that one is forced to reconsider one’s own position, in theory and in practice, at least in part.” The Secretariat then stressed that “in discussion the truth will prevail by no other means than by the truth itself. Therefore, the liberty of the participants must be ensured by law and revered in practice.”⁴ These are emphatic words—which should be applicable not only to the Catholics of the world but in general.

When to Dialogue—and When Not to

In principle, of course, we ought to be open to dialogue with all possible partners on all possible subjects. Normally this principle should be followed today and doubtless for many years to come because the world’s religions and ideologies have stored up so much misinformation about and hostility toward one another that it is almost impossible for us to know ahead of time what our potential partner is truly like on any given subject. We normally need first of all to enter into sincere dialogue with every potential partner, 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 have merely hidden commonly shared positions. When we enter dialogue 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. As mentioned, 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. We know from our experience that the complementary differences will usually far outnumber the contradictory. Learning of these authentic but complementary differences will not only enhance our knowledge but also may very well lead to the desire to adapt one or more of our partner's complementary differences for ourselves. As the very term suggests, the differences somehow complete each other. As the Chinese Taoist saying puts it: *Xiang fan xiang cheng* (contraries complete each other).

Just as we must constantly be extremely cautious about "fixing" our differences *a priori* lest in acting precipitously we misplace them, so too, 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 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 partners' tradition which we might then wish to appropriate for our own tradition. That does and should happen, but then we are speaking either of something which the two traditions ultimately held in common and was perhaps atrophied or suppressed in one, or of something which is an authentic but complementary difference. If this difference, however, is perceived as analogous rather than complementary or contradictory, it will be seen to operate within the total organic structure of the other religion-ideology and to fulfill its function properly only within it. It would not be able to have the same function, i.e., relationship to the other parts in our total organic structure, and hence would not be understood to be in direct opposition, in contradiction to the "differing" element within our structure. 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.

Yet, at times we can find contradictory truth claims, value claims, presented by different religious-deological 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, 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, Muslim, Marxist) have done in face of the now largely, but unfortunately not entirely, suppressed Hindu tradition of widow burning (*suttee*)? Should he or she try to learn its value, tolerate it, ignore it, oppose it (in what manner)? Or the Nazi tenet of killing all Jews? These are relatively clear issues, but what of a religion-ideology that approves slavery, as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam did until only a little over a century ago? Maybe that is clear enough today, but what of sexism—or only a little sexism? Or the claim that only through capitalism—or socialism—human liberation can be gained? Making a decision on the proper stance becomes less and less clear-cut.

Eventually it was clear to most non-Hindus in the nineteenth century that the proper attitude was not dialogue with Hinduism on *suttee*, but opposition. But 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 two thousand years to come to that conclusion concerning 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 traditions; 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 religion-ideological difference is in fact contradictory, and then, if it is, whether it is of sufficient importance and nature to warrant active opposition.

Full Human Life

Because all religions-ideologies are attempts to explain the meaning of human life and how to live accordingly, those doctrines and customs which are perceived as hostile to human life are not complementary or analogous

but contradictory, and opposition to them should be proportional to the extent they threaten life. An authentically full human life then must be the measure against which all elements of all religions-ideologies are tested as we make judgments about whether they are in harmony, complementarity, analogy, or contradiction, and then act accordingly.

Since human beings are by nature historical beings, what it means to be fully human is evolving. At bottom everything human flows from what would seem to be acceptable to all as a description of the minimally essential human structure, that is, being an animal who can think abstractly and make free decisions. Only gradually has humanity come to the contemporary position where claims are made in favor of “human rights,” that things are due to all humans specifically because they are human. This position, in fact, has not always and everywhere been held. Indeed, it was for the most part hardly conceived until recently.

Only a little over a hundred years ago, for example, slavery was still widely accepted and even vigorously defended and practiced by high Christian churchmen, not to speak of Jewish and Muslim slave traders. And yet this radical violation of human rights has today been largely eliminated both in practice and law. Today no thinker or public leader would contemplate justifying slavery, at least in its directly named form of the past (see the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* by the United Nations in 1948; art. 4). Here we have an obvious example of the historical evolution of the understanding of what it means to be fully human, i.e., that human beings are by nature radically free.

However, the human right to private property (*Universal Declaration* art. 17: “Everyone has the right to own property alone”), perhaps first publicly acknowledged in the West in seventeenth-century John Locke’s phrase, “life, liberty and property,” had been unthinkable until the requisite previous development of control over matter. The same is true of the twentieth-century claim to the right to work (*Universal Declaration*, art. 23):

The development of this new control over nature—first over external nature and increasingly also over human nature—...has made possible entirely new dimensions of human self-development, and its apparently illimitable expansion leads to the expectation, at least in the developed countries, that it can release a sufficient potential so that everyone can participate in them—and consequently has a right to participate therein.⁵

Here are clear examples of the historical evolution of the understanding—if not always the practical realization—of what it means to be fully human in terms of the expansion of the basic capabilities of humanity.

What fundamentally was acknowledged in the twentieth century 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: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (*Universal Declaration*, art. 1). In the ethical sphere, this autonomy, which Thomas Aquinas recognized already in the thirteenth century,⁶ expanded into the social, political spheres in the eighteenth century. This is expressed in the slogan of the French Revolution: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity (contemporary consciousness of sexist language would lead to a substitute like “Solidarity” for “Fraternity”). With the term “Liberty” is understood all the personal and civil rights; with the term “Equality” is understood the political rights of participation in public decision-making; with the term “Solidarity” is understood (in an expanded twentieth-century sense) the social rights.

Though frequently resistant in the past, and too often still in the present, the great religious communities of the world have often and in a variety of ways expressed a growing awareness of and commitment to similar notions of what it means to be fully human. Through dialogue, humanity is painfully 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. Toward that end the Global Ethic Movement was launched.⁷

Conclusion

The conclusion from these reflections, I believe, is clear: Interreligious, interideological dialogue is absolutely necessary in our contemporary world. Every religion and ideology can certainly make claim to the official statements from the Catholic Church about the necessity of dialogue, starting with Pope Paul VI in his first encyclical:

Dialogue is *demanded* nowadays....It is *demanded* by the dynamic course of action which is changing the face of modern society. It is *demanded* by the pluralism of society, and by the maturity man has reached in this day and age. Be he religious or not, his secular education has enabled him to think and speak, and to conduct a dialogue with dignity. (*Ecclesiam suam*, no. 78)

To this the Vatican Curia later added:

All Christians should do their best to promote dialogue between men of every class as a duty of fraternal charity suited to our progressive and adult age....The willingness to engage in dialogue is the measure and the strength of that general renewal which must be carried out in the Church (read: in every religion and ideology). (*Humanae personae dignitatem*, August 28, 1968, no. 1)

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Describe a significant encounter you have had with another religion or with a member of another religion. Explore the impact the encounter had on you. Was it positive or negative? Did it influence your ongoing perception of the entire religion and its members? Did you feel angry or threatened? Were you intrigued and interested to learn more? Did the other seem strange and baffling?
2. Have you had an experience of interreligious dialogue already? If so, what was the experience like?
3. Make a list of questions you have about each of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Add to this list as you read through this book. Which question in particular is most important for you right now?