

# WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

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## *1. The Meaning of 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 meant by it. However, there are many different kinds of two-way communication: e.g., fighting, wrangling, debating, etc. Clearly none of these are meant by 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,” etc. 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,” etc. 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 persuaded 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 the other.

This analysis may to some seem obvious, and, hence, superfluous. But I 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 which the one side knows it already has. In that situation, the “truth-holders” simply had a basic misunderstanding of the term dialogue and mistakenly termed their “convert-making” dialogue. Therefore, the above clarification is important.

We are, of course, in this context 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,” then 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.

## ***2. Why Dialogue Arose***

One can, of course, justifiably point to a number of recent developments that have contributed to the rise of dialogue) e.g., 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 only possible, but even necessary.

Whereas the understanding of truth in the West was largely absolute, static, monologic or exclusive up to the last century, it has subsequently become deabsolutized, dynamic and dialogic ) in a word: relational. This relatively “new” view of truth came about in at least six different but closely related ways.

0) Until the nineteenth century in Europe truth, that is, a statement about reality, was conceived in an absolute, static, exclusivistic either-or manner. It was believed that if statement was true at one time, it was always true, and not only in the sense of statements about empirical facts but also in the sense of statements about the meaning of things. Such is a ***classicist*** or ***absolutist*** view of truth.

1) Then, in the nineteenth century scholars came to perceive all statements about the truth of 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 deabsolutized in terms of time. Such is a ***historical*** view of truth.

2) Later on it was noted that we ask questions so as to obtain knowledge, 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.

3) Early in the twentieth century Karl Mannheim developed what he called the sociology of knowledge, which points out that every statement about the truth of the meaning of something was perspectival, for 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.

4) 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.

5) 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.” (*Summa Theologiae*, II/II, Q. 1, a. 2) Such is an *interpretative* view of truth.

6) 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, then 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 non-sense 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.

In brief, our understanding of truth and reality has been undergoing a radical shift. The new paradigm which is being born understands all statements about reality, especially 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 “deabsolutized”) it has become “relational,” that is, 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 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, then 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.

### ***3. 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 not either a Lutheran or a Jew, s/he 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, ideological dialogue, but it simply would not be inter-religious, inter-ideological, 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, then 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, then general reputation usually is looked to. 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 and Charles Curran were no longer to be considered Catholic theologians. In both these cases, however, hundreds of Catholic theologians subsequently stated publicly in writing that both those professors were indeed still Catholic theologians.

In the end, however, it seems best to follow the principle that each person should decide for her or himself 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 eccentric 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.

Likewise it is important to note that interreligious, interideological dialogue is not something to be limited to official representatives of communities. Actually the great majority of the vast amount of such dialogue that has occurred throughout the world, particularly in the past three 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 her/his 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, etc. The larger the asymmetry is, the less the communication will be two-way, that is, 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, rather, should involve every level of the religious, ideological communities, all the way down to the "persons in the pews." Only in this way will the religious, ideological communities learn from each other and come to understand each other as they truly are.

The Catholic bishops of the world expressed this insight very clearly and vigorously at Vatican II 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 ringingly 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 1,100,000,000 Catholics in the world) and the further hundreds of millions 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? I will argue below in more detail that only those who have a “deabsolutized” understanding of truth will in fact be able 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, 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 deabsolutized) 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.

#### ***4. 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 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 the previously-held intellectual positions and lead to dialogue in the cognitive field. Catholic and Protestant clergy, for example, who found themselves together in Concentration Camp Dachau because of joint resistance to one or other Nazi anti-human action 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 (1962-65) officially to embrace ecumenism and interreligious dialogue after many centuries of vigorous official rejection.

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 our selves 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.

## ***5. 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, then the other side must teach, and thus both learning and teaching occurs. We know, however, that if each side comes to the encounter 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 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 our selves in ways we could not otherwise do. 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 otherwise, and thus come to know ourselves as we could not have outside of 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 her or himself, but is always in relationship to others, “how we are in the world,” how we relate to and impact on 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 our selves and of the other that we gain in the 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 our selves 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. 755-759), need not detain us here. What is important to see, however, is that the chain dialogue-knowledge-change must not be broken. If the final link, change, is not falls away, the authenticity of the second, knowledge, and the first, dialogue are called into question. To repeat: The goal of dialogue is that “each side to learn, and change accordingly.”

There are likewise communal goals in interreligious, interideological dialogue. Some of them 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 in mind. 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, however, 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 what their 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, there 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, for only thus can the whole communities grow in knowledge and inner and outer transformation, and thereby bridge over 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 *tertium quid* (a third reality)) hardly the intended integrative goal of dialogue.

It is clear that 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. Likewise, however, it is important that we learn more comprehensively what our differences are. Such differences

may be (1) complementary, as for example, a stress 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 main goal of dialogue.

## ***6. 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, (1) 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. One important rule to keep in mind, however, whenever something more formal than the personal conversation is planned is that, (2) all the traditions to be engaged in a dialogue be involved in its initial planning. This is particularly true when different communities first begin to encounter each other. Then dialogue on the potential dialogue itself becomes an essential part of the dialogic encounter.

It is clear that in the first encounters between communities, (3) the most difficult points of differences should not be tackled. Rather, those subjects which show promise of highlighting commonalities should be treated so that mutual trust between the partners can be established and developed. For without mutual trust, there will be no dialogue.

Vital to the development of this needed mutual trust is that, (4) 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, however, if I am not totally sincere and honest. Of course, the same is true for my partners; I cannot learn to know them and their traditions truly if they are not completely sincere and honest. Likewise note: we must simultaneously presume total sincerity and honesty in our partners as well as practice them ourselves, otherwise there will be no trust) and without trust there will be no dialogue.

Care must also be taken in dialogue, (5) 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. For example, the Hindu custom mentioned above, the burning of live widows, *suttee*, is not to be compared with the Christian commitment to the dignity of each individual life, but to the Christian centuries-long practice (fortunately now abandoned) of burning witches.

There has already been earlier mention of several other “means” of dialogue: (6) Each partner in the dialogue must define her or himself; 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 hence perforce can be accurately described only by the one experiencing the living, growing religious reality. (7) 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. (8) Of course, only equals can engage in full authentic dialogue; the degree of inequality will determine the degree of two-way communication, that is, the degree of dialogue experienced.

An indispensable major means of dialogue is (9) a self-critical attitude toward our self 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) but 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 Muslim, 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 true honesty, no authentic integrity.

Finally, the most fundamental means to dialogue is, (10) 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, then creative, fruitful dialogue, and a growing transformation of each participant's life and that of their communities will follow. (See the *Dialogue Decalogue* below.)

## 7. The Subject of Dialogue

We already spoke about choosing at first those subjects which promise to yield a high degree of common ground so as to establish and develop mutual trust, and the three main areas of dialogue: the **cognitive, active** and **spiritual**.

In some ways the latter, the **spiritual** area, would seem to be the most attractive, at least to those with a more interior, mystical, psychological bent. Moreover, it promises a very great 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, e.g., Neoplatonism. For instance, 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; *halachah* 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. Consequently, such an interpretation of religion or ideology is called **theocentric**.

Attractive as is theo-centrism, one must be cautious not to waive 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 our selves, each other, the world around us, and the Ultimate Source. Moreover, a theocentric approach has the disadvantage of not including non-theists in 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, [w]holy life; similarly, *soteria* in Greek), as what all humans have in common in the “spiritual” area, theists and non-theists. 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. That having been said, however, every dialogue group should nevertheless be encouraged to follow creatively its own inner instinct 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 on the other hand 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 a) for some perhaps unexpected source, the Vatican Curia. 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” (Secretariatus pro Non-credenti, *Humanae personae dignitatem*, August 28, 1968). These are emphatic words) which again should be applicable not only to the Catholics of the world, but in general.

### ***8. When to Dialogue ) and When Not***

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 each other that it is almost impossible for us to know ahead of time what our potential partner is truly like on any given subject. Consequently, 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 merely hid commonly shared positions. When we enter dialogue, however, 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. Furthermore, we know from our experience that the complementary differences will usually far outnumber the contradictory. Similarly, 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 our self. As the very term indicates, 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 mis-place 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 partner's tradition which we might then wish to appropriate for our own tradition. That of course 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. At the same time, however, it needs to be remembered that 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-ideological 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, however, 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 s/he try to learn its value, tolerate it, ignore it, oppose it (in what manner)? Or the Nazi tenet of killing all Jews? These, however, are relatively clear issues, but what of a religion-ideology that approves slavery, as Christianity, Judaism and Islam did until 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 tradition; 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 religious-ideological difference is in fact contradictory, and then, if it is, whether it is of sufficient importance and of a nature to warrant active opposition.

## ***9. Full Human Life***

Because all religions and ideologies are attempts to explain the meaning of human life and how to live accordingly, it would seem that those doctrines and customs which are perceived as hostile to human life are not complementary or analogous but contradictory, and that opposition should be proportional to the extent they threaten life. What is to be included in an authentically full human life then must be the measure against which all elements of all religions-ideologies must be 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. It has been only gradually that humanity has 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.

What in this century has been acknowledged 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,<sup>1</sup> expanded into the social, political spheres in the eighteenth century) well capsulated 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 likewise often and in a variety of ways expressed a growing awareness of and commitment to many of the same notions of what it means to be fully human. Hence, through dialogue humanity is painfully slowly 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.

## ***10. Conclusion***

The conclusion from these reflections, I believe, is clear: Interreligious, interideological dialogue is absolutely necessary in our contemporary world. Again, every religion and ideology can make its own several 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).

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 91, a. 2: “Among other things, however, the rational creature submits to divine providence in a more excellent manner in so far as it participates itself in providence by acting as providence both for itself and for others.” “Inter cetera autem rationalis creature excellentiori quondam modo divinae providentiae subiacet, inquantum et ipsa fit providentiae particeps, sibi ipsi et aliis providens.”