



GROUND RULES FOR  
INTERRELIGIOUS,  
INTERIDEOLOGICAL  
DIALOGUE  
by  
Leonard Swidler

**I.** The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn—that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly.

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

For Dialogue Commandments III-X see inside page 2

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# di·a·logue\ dī-ə-lóg

2 a : a conversation between two or more persons

b : an exchange of ideas and opinions

## Resources For Starting and Maintaining Healthy Interfaith Dialogue

### GETTING STARTED

**Interfaith Partnership/Faith Beyond Walls** has set as a major priority the expansion of interfaith dialogue opportunities in the St. Louis Metro Area. The idea of actually starting an interfaith dialogue group can be very in-

place in the St. Louis region. Regardless of how long these groups have been meeting, each one needs constant care and upkeep. The search for new dialoguers should be ongoing. The content of the dialogue experiences need to be

If you are ready to start a group, email us at [interfaithstl.org](mailto:interfaithstl.org).

As you become a participant in your own right, please share with us your observations, ideas, and visions. Contact us through the Dialogue page of the IP/FBW website. <http://www.interfaithstl.org/>

**Rule #1**  
Interfaith  
Dialogue is **not** for  
clergy types  
alone.



timidating. After all, many pleasant conversations have dissolved into verbal combat when the subject of religious faith is raised.

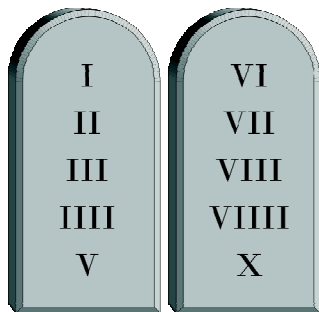
The purpose of this publication is to give individuals and groups the confidence they need to start and grow dialogue communities. There are many successful and ongoing interfaith dialogues taking

imaginative, topical, engaging, and accessible.

**di·a·logue\ dī-ə-lóg** cannot dictate to or manage dialogue communities. It can offer encouragement, warn against common mistakes that could lead to failure, and serve as a forum for best practices in interfaith dialogue.

### The Longest Continual Interfaith Dialogue Group in St. Louis

More than forty years ago, two well established community organizations convened a weekly (bi-weekly, monthly?) interfaith dialogue that continues to this day. (continued on p.2)



“Dialogue can take place only between equals.”

### The Seventh Commandment



Melkite Archbishop Elias Shakour autographs a book for Dr. Ghazala Hayat during an IP/FBW trip to Israel

## The Dialogue Decalogue—continued

**III.** Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity. Conversely, each participant must assume complete honesty and sincerity in the other partners. In brief: no trust, no dialogue.

**IV.** In interreligious, inter-ideological dialogue, we must not compare our ideals with our partner’s practice, but rather our ideals with our partner’s ideals, and our practice with our partner’s practice.

**V.** All participants must define themselves. (Only a Jew, for example, can define from the inside what it means to be a Jew. The rest can only describe what it looks like from the outside.) It is mandatory that all

dialogue partners define what it means to be an authentic member of their own tradition.

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

**VII.** Dialogue can take place only between equals.

**VIII.** Dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual trust. (Hence it is wise not to tackle the most difficult problems in the beginning, but rather to approach first those issues most likely to provide some common ground, thereby establishing the basis of human trust.)

**IX.** Persons entering into interreligious, interideological dialogue

must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological tradition. (A lack of self-criticism implies that one’s own tradition already has all the correct answers. Such an attitude makes dialogue not only unnecessary but even impossible because we enter into dialogue primarily so that WE can learn—which obviously is impossible if our tradition has never made a misstep, if it has all the right answers.)

**X.** Each participant eventually must attempt to experience the partner’s religion or ideology “from within.”

--from Toward a Universal Theology of Religion, edited by Leonard Swidler, pp. 13-16.

### (Continued from p. 1) The Longest Continual Interfaith Dialogue Group in St. Louis

Known as the “Tuesday Morning Dialogue Group, it was organized by Norman Stack, then Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council and O’Ray Graber, the Executive Director of the National Council of Christians and Jews (now known as the National Council for Community and Justice). Participants included Missouri Synod Lutherans and Greek Orthodox clergy, in the days before both groups withdrew from interfaith conversations.

Rabbi Jeffrey Stiffman,

Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Shaare Emeth, was a participant in the group for more than thirty years.

“What made this dialogue group successful for so many years was the contents of each session’s program. Participants were often expected to read extensively in preparation for the topic and the topics were not without controversy and deeply held opinions. Prominent guest speakers, when available, were also brought to the group.”

Stiffman also noted that recognized leaders from religious communities played an active role in this dialogue. He recalled the fact that the late Archbishop John May hardly ever missed a session. Dr. Waheed Rana, a leader in the St. Louis Muslim community, joined the group in the 1970’s as it expanded its reach beyond issues between Christians and Jews.

For more information about the Tuesday Dialogue Group Contact Batya Abramson Goldstein 314-442-3894

## Creative Interchange and the World's Religions by David Oughton

Throughout human history, there are many examples where organized religions have promoted fanaticism, prejudice, and violence against groups who believe differently. This is why the ecumenical theologian Professor Hans Kung in his Global Responsibility argues that "there will be no world peace without peace among the religions; there will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions; there will be no dialogue among the religions without investigation into common theological and philosophical foundations; and there will be no world peace without a common global ethic." He has also argued that interreligious dialogue must take place not only on the global level among religious leaders but it must especially flourish on the local level among representatives of various religions and philosophies.

For most of its history, the St. Louis area was home mainly to Christians and Jews. In the last few decades St. Louis, like metropolitan areas throughout North America and Europe, has been enriched by communities of Muslims, Confucianists, Taoists, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Baha'is, Native Americans and other religious and philosophic groups. For many years, representatives of many different religions and philosophies have been meeting in order to

discuss their common questions, concerns, and hopes.

Participants in interreligious dialogue have reached various stages. The first stage is tolerance of different beliefs and practices. Political and religious extremists are psychologically uncomfortable with uncertainty, doubts, and the possibility of multiple perspectives. The dogmatic or authoritarian approach assumes that one's religion or philosophy has a monopoly on truth and goodness whereas a humanistic or democratic approach is tolerant of diversity and sees other viewpoints as sharing truth and goodness. Rather than assuming that there can only be one true and good religion/philosophy (and it is mine!) or that my religion/philosophy is better than others, it is better to realize that religions and philosophies might be diverse and yet equally valid. A commitment to tolerance means abandoning the attitude that has caused so much bloodshed in the past and is still held by various kinds of fanatical extremists--that my group alone has all truth and divine sanction and all others are wrong or even demonic, and thus others must be either destroyed, subdued, or converted to my group's beliefs.

A second stage of interreligious dialogue is understanding. In contrast to a debate, the primary purpose of a dialogue is not to convince others of

the superiority of one's own beliefs and the inferiority of the others' beliefs, but to learn from others and thus change ourselves. All will be changed for the better and will have expanded and enriched their limited perspectives if they come to the dialogue with the attitude of learning and openness to expansion of one's way of viewing life. Those who participate in interreligious dialogue come to understand the similarities and the differences between what Professor Huston Smith calls the great "wisdom traditions." They all accept the Golden Rule of human conduct (some like Jesus said it positively: 'treat others the way you want to be treated' while others like Kung fu-tzu said it negatively: 'do not do to others what you do not want done to you'). They all accept five basic commands: do not kill, do not commit sexual immorality, do not steal, do not lie, and respect the elderly. They all emphasize the importance of family relationships, virtues (such as respect, humility, and compassion), and the avoidance of vices (such as egoism, hatred, and anger). Even though the wisdom traditions have many similar ethical teachings, interreligious dialogue also reveals their differences in philosophy, organization, system of authority, methods of spirituality, and social customs. Concerning philosophy, the world religions disagree on the



Dr. David Oughton, chair of Interfaith Partnership's committee on interreligious dialogue, teaches courses on the world's religions in the Department of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University.

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## The Difference Between Dialogue and Debate



"In dialogue,  
finding  
common  
ground is the  
goal.

In debate,  
winning is the  
goal."



**Dialogue** is collaborative: Two or More Sides working together toward common understanding.

In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.

In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.

Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participants point of view.

Dialogue complicates positions and issues.

Dialogue reveals assumptions for re-evaluation.

Dialogue causes introspection for one's own position.

It is acceptable to change one's position.

Dialogue is flexible in nature.

Dialogue stresses the skill of synthesis.

Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than either of the original solutions.

Dialogue strives for multiplicity in perspective.

Dialogue affirms the relationship between the participants through collaboration.

Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.

In dialogue one submits one's best thinking knowing that other's reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it,

**Debate** is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.

In debate, winning is the goal.

In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and counter its arguments.

Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.

Debate simplifies positions and issues.

Debate defends assumptions as truth.

Debate causes critique of the other position.

It is a sign of weakness and defeat to change one's position.

Debate is rigid in nature.

Debate stresses the skill of analysis.

Debate defends one's own position as the best solution and excludes other solutions.

Debate strives for singularity in perspective.

Debate affirms one's own strength in opposition to other points of view.

Debate creates a close-minded attitude and a determination to be right.

In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenges to show that it is right.

(Continued on next page)

## The Difference Between Dialogue and Debate (Continued)

**Dialogue** calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.

In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.

In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other position.

Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks not to alienate or offend.

Dialogue encourages de-polarization of an issue.

In dialogue, everyone is part of the solution to the problem.

Dialogue affirms the idea of people learning from each other.

Dialogue remains open-ended.

**Debate** calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.

In debate, one searches for glaring differences.

In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.

Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationships and often belittles or depreciates the other position.

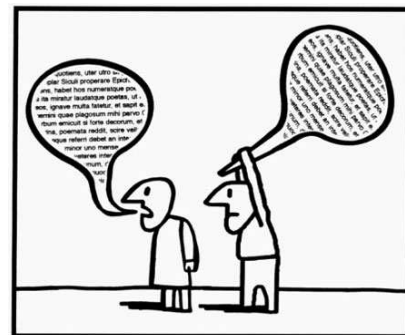
Debate encourages polarization of an issue.

In debate, one person or viewpoint attempts to win over the other.

Debate affirms the idea of people learning individually in competition with others.

Debate implies a conclusion.

From *Perspectives*, Educators for Social Responsibility



"In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.

In debate, one searches for glaring differences."

## di·a·logue\ dī-ə-lóg

2 a : a conversation between two or more persons  
b : an exchange of ideas and opinions

A quarterly publication of the Dialogue Committee of the Interfaith Partnership. Future issues will appear on January 15, April 15, July 15, and October 15. Articles and photos dealing with the topic of religious dialogue are encouraged. Please submit the article or photo via email at least two weeks before the issue for which they are intended. Submissions should be sent to [mshook@ti-stl.org](mailto:mshook@ti-stl.org).



## Creative Interchange and the World's Religions—continued from page 3

the following questions: whether God is a personal supreme Being or whether God is an impersonal cosmic mind, force, or natural process; whether humans live only one lifetime or many lifetimes in various earthly forms; whether this is the only universe that has and will ever exist or whether this universe is one of an infinite number of past and future universes; whether time and history are linear or cyclic; and whether humans are essentially good by nature, whether human nature possesses both good and evil inclinations, or whether human nature is essentially flawed and thus in need of salvation.

A third goal of interreligious dialogue is cooperation. Those who tolerate and understand differences between groups realize that people of different religions, social systems, and nations can and must work together on their common problems and concerns. All peoples must fight against their common enemies: war, pollution, depletion of natural resources, ignorance, prejudice, injustices, violence, poverty, hunger, and any other dehumanizing condition. One participant in the St. Louis dialogue has emphasized that "religions are responsible in raising awareness all over the world that war must be abolished as a means of resolving conflicts and that world government and world law must be instituted." On the local level, members of different religions have joined together to fight against one of St. Louis' greatest problems--racism.

Beyond tolerance, understanding, and cooperation is appreciation of different perspectives. This means respecting what is valuable within different religions and cultures. Gentiles do not have to convert to Judaism in order to appreciate what the Sabbath implies for needed rest, reflection, and the building of deeper family and community ties.

Non-Buddhists do not have to convert to Buddhism in order to appreciate the need for the regular practice of meditation. Non-Taoists do not have to become Taoists in order to appreciate the teaching of harmony with the Way or Tao of Nature/Reality. One does not have to become a Jain in order to appreciate Mahavira's teaching of ahimsa or non-injury toward any living creatures. Whereas dogmatists view the founder of their religion as an authority who has already found "the right answer," those committed to interreligious dialogue discover that the founders of the world religions have much to teach everyone. According to the philosopher Henry Nelson Wieman, people such as Confucius, Lao Tzu, Muhammad, Jesus, Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Mahavira, Baha'u'llah, and Guru Nanak should be viewed as "individuals who have struggled earnestly and persistently with the ultimate issues of life and death; we should study reverently their lives and their teaching to understand the issues; these great souls call to us to join with them in the struggle to find a better answer."

The final goal of interreligious dialogue is promoting the process of creative interchange. This means expanding one's perspective by intercommunication with those who have different experiences, beliefs, and values in order to develop community. One's ultimate commitment should not be to the dogmas and beliefs of one's religion, nation, or culture but rather to this process of creative interchange. Such a process implies that religions and philosophies must be open to the possibility of learning from those who have different perspectives. By learning from persons of different religions or cultures, we will often find ourselves saying "I never thought of that idea or method before. Now I look upon this problem or this

topic in a different way. Now I see more possibilities and options." Because of interreligious dialogue, many in St. Louis have kept their minds open, receptive, inquiring, and outreaching.

The goal should not be to make everyone in the world a member of the same religion or philosophy. The goal should be that everyone becomes committed to the practice of peace, justice, and compassion for their fellow human beings, and that they devote their lives to providing the conditions for creative interchanges between people. The value of any religion or philosophy depends on what it can contribute to promoting creative interchanges between parents and children, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors, various races and cultures, and other religions and philosophies.

World peace, like local peace, requires structures, laws, customs, and a sense of community for implementing nonviolent methods for resolving conflicts that naturally arise between individuals and large groups of people. Religions can play a positive role in achieving both local and global peace by teaching the Golden Rule and their common principles of justice and humane living. Some St. Louisans have begun to plant seeds of interreligious understanding and cooperation through the simple method of sitting down together and respectfully listening to each other and learning from each others' religions and philosophies. Hopefully this spirit and process of creative interchange will eventually spread around the world.

di·a·logue\ dī-ə-lóg

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### IF YOU FEED THEM THEY WILL COME

Inter-religious dialogue is about developing inter-personal relationships. Successful dialogue groups have managed to create an atmosphere of warmth and hospitality using one of the most ancient and well tested techniques—serving food as part of the experience.

The host of the dialogue group needs to be sensitive to the food customs of the invitees, as well as providing choices. There is no need for elaborate meals, just providing snacks that are appropriate for the time and size of the meeting group will be sufficient.

Food can also serve as a topic for interfaith discussion. For example, what foods are connected to which celebrations in a given religious tradition.

Dialogue group meetings need to provide time for informal contact between participants, where there is no specific agenda. Being able to do this over food is a great way to start.

