

"A Decalogue of Imperatives" Ten Commandments for Interfaith Dialogue

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Introduction

In campus ministry, we increasingly speak of the importance – even the imperative – of interfaith conversation. I have only ten words to add, but they constitute Ten Commandments for Interfaith Dialogue, a Decalogue of Imperatives:

Relate.

Listen.

Expect.

Respect.

Articulate.

Disagree.

Work.

Share.

Study.

Hope.

1. Relate.

Relate to each other personally. Develop personal relationships within the group. Get to know one another. Be human. Be social. Remember always the importance of developing personal relationships, because true conversation takes place always within a relationship – the better the relationship, the better the communication. The Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Ottawa, Canada has been meeting since 1982, with some continuity of membership going right back to the original meeting. It has become a group of people who know each other, trust each other, like each other, want to see

each other again. This has made for honest conversation and good attendance.

2. Listen.

The mouth is not the most important organ of conversation, and certainly not for conversation across cultural and religious differences. To love is to step into the presence of the other and listen. Listening is the language of love.

3. Expect.

Expect to grow and change. Expect to change your mind about certain things. I hear Micah 6 verse 8 and try to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with my God, who may have spoken different revelation to my neighbour of a different faith, a revelation that will only come to me through that neighbour and our relationship and our conversation. Expect to learn. Expect that the loss of ignorance, and the gaining of knowledge and perspective will change you. Have high expectations of interfaith dialogue. Be demanding of it, and it will be better and more worthwhile.

4. Respect.

Respect the other participants and what they have to say. This means much more than mere courtesy and language – although it does mean that. Be fair. Practice the Golden Rule. Do not use hurtful words. Do not hang on to false ideas and prejudices... let them go. Do not insist on using your own terms to describe the other's beliefs. Expect them to use their own vocabulary to define their own faith, and learn that vocabulary... out of respect.

5. Articulate.

Articulate your faith, express your own beliefs, witness to what you believe most deeply. As you listen to other's deepest beliefs, you are also given permission to speak your own. I am not as interested in dialogue with a cultural Jew as I am with Jews who practice their religion in observances and ritual, in family and congregational life. I am not particularly interested in dialogue with "Id-Muslims", cultural Muslims who have become secularized humanists, melting into North American society. Moreover, my experience in interfaith dialogue is that other groups expect me to be a Christian, a believing Christian not a Santa Claus/Easter Bunny Christian. They expect me to be articulate in my faith, and they invite me to be so. (This is, personally, one of the great values of interfaith dialogue for me. In interfaith conversation, I am challenged to express my beliefs again and again in different settings, different relationships, in response to different

questions. And far from the fear that some Christians have – that interfaith conversation might dilute my faith – I find that it dilates my faith. "Dilute" means "to weaken or water down". "Dilate" means "to make larger and wider".)

6. Disagree.

Agree to disagree, right from the start. You are different. You are not two voices singing a duet in perfect harmony, you sing to each other in different parts. We usually do find harmony in our songs. But they are different songs. Name the differences. Identify them. Question the others about the aspects of their religion that you find new and different and strange, and invite and expect reciprocal questions directed back toward you.

7. Work.

Work together with your neighbours of another faith to make this world a better place, acting together to care for God's good creation – the environment – or acting together to care for some part of our human society – neighbour love. In Christianity, with all our diversity and internal pluralism, we say that theology divides but mission (or ministry) unites. In other words, if we sit around and discuss various theological doctrines, the conversation becomes debate and we live on our differences. If we work together to feed the hungry, build houses for the homeless, free the prisoner, care for the vulnerable, we live on our common concern, our common humanity and our common spirituality. There is a learning for us all from this Christian experience. Where the members of an interfaith dialogue can co-sign a letter to the editor or co-sponsor a practical project or participate together in any common ethical effort, it is a powerful and positive experience.

8. Share.

Where possible, share each other's celebrations, rituals, worship and meditation. I have attended prayer at the mosque – as a guest, an invited guest. Dr. Solaiman or Abdul Rashid has invited me and given me some orientation. I grew up as a minority Christian in a Jewish community – I have attended many, many Jewish celebrations in my life. My friends wanted me to be there. They attended important celebrations in my life, too. In June 2000, in Vancouver, 400 religious professionals who work in higher education held the first Global Multifaith Conference for campus chaplains. There were people from 6 continents and 8 world religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Aboriginal and Baha'i). There was daily worship at a number of times in many different places for the various

faith groups. Many participants attended worship in other faith traditions as invited and welcomed guests. This was a very positive aspect of our community life. In some cases, as mutual respect, trust and understanding grow, it sometimes becomes possible to participate in each other's religious activities (a rabbi preaching the sermon in a Christian worship service) and even to participate together in common religious activities (interfaith or "multifaith" worship). We have done this many times at Carleton University and in the City of Ottawa: prayer-for-peace services, events against racism, 9/11 memorial services. The Canadian Council of Churches has published thoughtful guidelines for multifaith worship (see Appendix).

9. Study.

Do your homework to learn about each other's history and scriptures. Ask questions. Loan books. Read. Agree to read a particular book and discuss it together. Study. Learn. Ignorance is the enemy. We all know that not knowing each other personally prevents dialogue – it allows for ignorance and prejudice, fear and even hate. Not knowing factual information about each other is another dangerous and destructive form of ignorance, another enemy. As dialogue begins, we acknowledge our ignorance; but we do not accept it. By agreeing to participate in dialogue, we have agreed to an agenda of learning. Study.

10. Hope.

And have hope that the conversations we have among religious groups, and the dialogues we have between faith groups will make for peace and justice and fullness of life. Without such vision, any individual local dialogue will perish. Never doubt that the efforts we make in our own individual lives, our own local communities, the specific dialogues we participate in... never doubt that they contribute to a realization of human society more as God intended. Never doubt that human society may be better because of our efforts. Never doubt that we can do this, but have hope. We live at the most dynamic time in world history. We are not prisoners of the past. By grace we are, in partnership with God, creators of the future. Hope. And have hope.