The Dialogue Industry

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The United States has a significant dialogue industry. In virtually every town, there is an interfaith dialogue organization. Even in those towns where there are very few non-Christians, one finds an organization committed to including those few. It is difficult to obtain data on exactly how many groups there are; however, there must be many thousands.

In this lecture, we shall look at the assumptions underpinning this dialogue industry. I shall show that the assumptions tend to reflect a western, individualist, post-Enlightenment worldview. To identify these assumptions, I shall start by examining the work of two key advocates of a dialogical approach: Leonard Swidler and John Hick. With Swidler, we shall examine his famous Dialogue Decalogue; with Hick, we shall look at his pluralist theology of other religions. We shall work through these two scholars with the goal of understanding the assumptions that are being made in the US dialogue industry. We start with Leonard Swidler.

Leonard Swidler

Swidler is at Temple University in Philadelphia. He has been a pioneer in this field. As editor of the highly influential *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, he has been arguing for a dialogical approach for some thirty years.

In 1983, Leonard Swidler outlined his now famous ‘Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules of Interreligious Dialogue’. He starts that article with the following definition:

‘Dialogue is conversation between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that he or she can change and grow.’

He contrasts dialogue with the more confrontational approaches of the past. So he writes:

‘In the religious sphere in the past, we came together to discuss with those differing with us, for example, Catholics with Protestants, either to defeat an opponent, or to learn about an opponent so as to deal more effectively with him or her, or at best to negotiate with him or her. If we faced each other at all, it was in confrontation – sometimes more openly polemically, sometimes more subtly so, but always with the ultimate goal of defeating the other, because we were convinced that we alone had the absolute truth.’

Already in these opening paragraphs, we can identify certain key assumptions. The first is that the encounter is predominantly between two individuals. He seems to be assuming a particular account of personhood, which is predominantly western. (A point, we shall see confirmed, when we look at his ten rules.) The second assumption is that the dialogical approach is a distinctively modern approach. The past, explains Swidler, is confrontational; the present moment needs to be genuinely open. In the past, we assumed we all had the truth; in the present, we suspect the truth is found in many different traditions. Indeed says Swidler, ‘it is obvious that interreligious dialogue is something new under the sun.’

Before explaining why these two assumptions are problematic, it is important to look at the rest of the Swidler commandments. The first commandment is as follows: ‘The primary purpose of dialogue is to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality and then to act accordingly.’ So as the two individuals encounter each other, so the discovery of what the other believes brings about changes in the individuals. The second commandment is: ‘Interreligious dialogue must be a two-sided project –
within each religious community and between religious communities.' Although it is true that Swidler acknowledges the corporate nature of interreligious dialogue, he means by this no more than the fact there are ‘co-religionists’. In other words, we must talk to both those outside our faith community and those within it. The third and fourth commandments are linked: we should come to the dialogue with ‘complete honesty and sincerity’, and assume the same in the other. So the individuals must exhibit certain basic ethical qualities. The fifth commandment requires that ‘each participant must define himself’. Here ‘self-ascription’ is made an absolute. Even though the dialogue will change the faith of the individual, no one is allowed to question the appropriateness of the label. So, for example, even if a Roman Catholic rejects the doctrines of the Incarnation, the Trinity, the appropriateness of the Magisterium, she can still call herself a Roman Catholic, even if the Pope would not recognize this. The sixth commandment calls for openness about the topics which will be discussed; there should be, explains Swidler, ‘no hard-and-fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are’. The seventh requires that ‘dialogue can take place only between equals’. His illustration is that a scholar and a lay person cannot have a dialogue. (Put literally, this commandment could make all dialogue impossible: one would have to have identical educational backgrounds.) The eighth requires that ‘dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual trust.’ Here Swidler explains revealingly:

‘Although interreligious dialogue must occur with some kind of “corporate” dimension, that is, the participants must be involved as members of a religious community – for instance, qua Buddhists or Hindus – it is also fundamentally true that it is only persons who can enter into dialogue. But a dialogue amongst persons can be built only on personal trust.’

This is revealing because Swidler does everything he can do to minimize the corporate nature of human living. Conceptually he works with an individual, whose family, community, and religious identifications are virtually irrelevant. The ninth commandment requires that ‘persons entering into interreligious dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious traditions’. Although he concedes that one is allowed to ‘stand within a religious tradition’, he insists that one cannot assume that ‘one’s own tradition already has the correct answers.’ This rule prohibits any conservative from coming to the table. One is only invited if one is already persuaded of certain post-Enlightenment assumptions about knowledge. The last commandment involves the obligation that ‘each participant eventually must attempt to experience the partner’s religion “from within”’. So let us bring together the assumptions we detect in this text. We have already noted the first assumption: Swidler is operating with a western account of the individual. This individual is entirely disconnected from all ties (family, community, national, let alone, religious). Now for many cultures this is simply unintelligible. However, Swidler is an American. He is shaped by the Enlightenment talk of ‘individual human rights’. And it is helpful if we look at the origins of such talk in more detail.

It was perhaps John Locke who articulated this worldview most clearly. In his *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke explains how political obligation can be justified without reference to the Bible. His argument ran as follows: humans are by nature free and independent. They can, however, acquire obligations to obey political authorities that restrict their freedom, by consenting to them. The founding of political society is an agreement of all the members to accept restrictions on their freedom. From then on those members are required to comply with the rules of their society because they have consented to do so in the original contraction. The original members give their explicit consent and all subsequent generations give their tacit consent. Locke creates in this narrative a basic unit of society, which is the rational, autonomous individual. Locke offers the outrageous historical myth of a state of nature that was overcome by the rational calculation of individuals that recognized it was in their interests to surrender certain rights for the privilege of living under law. Locke’s achievement in the history of ideas was to invent this isolated individual who separate from parents, family, extended family, neighbors, community, town, country, and fellow travelers on their faith journey is able to decide whether to opt in or opt out of law.
Having created this isolated individual, modern America has gone on to celebrate his or her significance. The entitlement to ‘find yourself’ (with its corresponding rights ‘be whatever you want to be’ and ‘not to be shaped by anything outside yourself’) has become a sanctified principle of western living. We make up our own minds. Leonard Swidler assumes this post-Enlightenment fiction at the heart of his system. The individual encounters another individual. This individual has an unchallenged right to define him or herself. This individual must not simply dialogue with those outside but encounter the other individuals who make up his or her own tradition. There is no ‘body of Christ’ theology in Swidler’s worldview. Each individual must stand alone – isolated and naked.

The second assumption is that ‘dialogue’ is entirely new. To set up a contrast between the pre-modern and the modern in this crude way is a gross distortion of the past that we have inherited. It is not true to say that our pre-modern Christians only ‘confronted’ the other. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) great skill was to ‘dialogue’ with neo-platonism to create the shape of the Christian tradition for centuries. Aquinas (1225-1274) is equally dialogical. David Burrell has made this a major theme of his work. He writes:

‘[B]y the twelfth century, a Jewish thinker of Mosaic stature, Moses Maimonides, immersed in the culture of the Islamicate, adapted the stringent criticisms his Muslim predecessor, al-Ghazali, had made of Islamic “philosophers”, to defend the free creation of the universe by one God, in the face of alternatives inspired by Plotinus. Thomas Aquinas adopted the signal philosophical work of the one whom he called “Rabbi Moses,” The Guide of the Perplexed, to advance his project of expounding Christian revelation by using the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato which he encountered through the writings of Ibn Sina (Avicenna). Thus, the task of articulating the free creation of the universe, and thereby showing how human inquiry begun in wonder can peak there as well, became the fruit of an unwitting but immensely fruitful collaboration among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars, on the strength of initiatives taken by Islamic thinkers.’

The truth, then, about the Christian tradition is that many of the greatest theologians have always been willing to engage with the truth where ever it is to be found. Aquinas was deliberate: as Burrell notes his source explicitly includes Rabbi Moses, let alone his enormous debt to that other ‘pagan’ Aristotle.

It is true that there are plenty examples of a past which has been confrontational. But the opposite is also true: there are plenty of instances of a dialogical spirit pervading our tradition. Naturally Augustine and Aquinas break many of Swidler’s rules, but that is not to say that there isn’t a real willingness to learn from the exchanges.

The third assumption embedded in Swidler’s ten commandments is his commitment to ‘critical thinking’. At this point the Enlightenment commitment to rationality rears its head. And Swidler uses this commitment to locate the conversation with two people on the edge of their respective traditions. He celebrates those who are already uncomfortable with their tradition. The assumption is that if one is uncomfortable with one’s own tradition, then one will find engagement with the other easier. This rule makes it impossible for any conservative to come to the table. The sign is clear: only liberals allowed. Given that conservatives make up the vast majority of religious adherents, this guarantees that only a small minority of religious people will be able to dialogue.

The type of theology operating in interfaith circles exacerbates this exclusion of the conservatives. Many interfaith meetings assume that everyone agrees with the proposition that ‘all religions lead to God’ or ‘claims to absolute truth are wrong’. Actually explaining with any precision what is meant by such propositions is very difficult. The philosopher who has done this most clearly is John Hick. It is for this reason that we turn to him next.
John Hick

Attend almost any interfaith dialogue in the West and, early on in the proceedings, someone will say, ‘it is good that we all worship the same God.’ Other slogans, which attract almost universal assent, are ‘the problem with fundamentalists is their claim that they have the whole truth’, and ‘we just call God by different names.’ However, precisely what is meant by these slogans is much harder to establish. This is the reason why John Hick is so important. He wants to affirm these slogans and wants to do so in a way that is coherent and clear.

John Hick starts his work by building on the taxonomy suggested by his student, Alan Race. Hick argues that ‘exclusivist’ and ‘inclusivist’ responses to religious diversity are inappropriate. Instead, we should all become ‘pluralist’. This debate is provoked by the problem of soteriology in Christian doctrine, namely, if Jesus is the only way to salvation, then what about those who are not Christian? The exclusivist argues that orthodox Christians are committed to the Biblical claim that Christ is the only way to be saved (see John 14: 6). And this is the reason for the missionary imperative to reach those outside the Church. The inclusivist takes the line that the saving activity of God in Christ does not necessarily need conscious recognition. It is possible for a person to be saved by Christ through obedient observation of a different religious tradition (e.g. Islam). Such Muslims, explains the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, are really ‘anonymous Christians’. Hick rejects the exclusivist position as incoherent and unjust. It is incoherent because Christians believe that God desires the salvation of all people (1 Tim 2:4) and that desire is unrealizable if only one cultural religion is legitimate. It is unjust, says Hick, because the majority of people, due to no fault of their own, are born into non-Christian cultures. A loving God, argues Hick, would not condemn to hell the majority of people just because they were born into a different culture. Hick rejects the inclusivist position because it is epistemologically too self-confident and insulting. On epistemology, Hick’s view is that no human can be completely sure about the nature of God and God’s relations with the world. The inclusivist is confident that the Christian drama is closer to the truth and that all other religions only have (at best) a partial knowledge of that truth; Hick cannot see anything that justifies that self-confidence. It is insulting and patronizing because it does not acknowledge the ‘self-definition’ of a person (as, say, a Muslim) but instead turns that person into an ‘anonymous Christian’.

So his solution is the so-called ‘pluralist hypothesis’. The heart of the pluralist hypothesis is a single reality that is accessed and partially revealed in all the major religions of the world. Now what is the reality like? Hick’s initial writings suggested a ‘theistic pluralism’ – a single God, who was loving and good, was underpinning all the major faith traditions. But later, he recognized that ‘theistic pluralism’ could not accommodate Buddhism. Buddhism takes innumerable different forms, but there are significant strands that hardly talk about “God” at all. God hardly figures in the four Noble Truths, which are the central teaching of the Buddha. So in Hick’s Gifford Lectures, published as An Interpretation of Religion, Hick argues for a ‘Real’, which no tradition can describe or claim to know exactly. In this way, the significance of Nirvana in Buddhism can be accommodated in the experience of the Real.

So we are left with the following picture: the Real is the objective sense of the transcendent, which is interpreted differently in each culture. For Hindus living in India, they might call the transcendent ‘Krishna’, while Muslims in Turkey talk of ‘Allah’, and Christians in North America call it ‘Christ’. Hick acknowledges his debt to the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal. The noumenal is knowledge of the divine as ‘it is in itself’. The phenomenal is knowledge of the divine as ‘it appears to mind.’ The noumenal is inaccessible. All we know is that each culture is interpreting an ‘objective’ experience of the Real in its own language and concepts. We cannot claim that any particular culture is more or less right, because none of us can transcend our own culture and find out exactly what the Real really is like.
Although one might appreciate Hick’s charitable affirmation of religious diversity, the conclusion of his logic might disturb many committed believers in the major world faiths. His conclusion is that all we know about the ‘Real’ is that it exists, apart from that we have to be agnostic. For Hick, any distinctive doctrine that conflicts with the pluralist hypothesis has to be rejected. So, for Hick, Muslims are mistaken to claim that the Qur’an is the final and definitive revelation from God as are Christians when they claim that Jesus is the incarnation of God. These doctrines, as traditionally understood, are incompatible with the pluralist hypothesis. For if the Qur’an is true, then the Qur’anic worldview is truer than the alternatives and, in particular, polytheists and Trinitarian Christians are mistaken.

Hick’s theology is extremely popular in interfaith circles. But it does require that all participants must become ‘liberal’ adherents of our faith traditions. All the distinctive truth claims within each tradition must be radically reinterpreted. So Jesus instead of being the Incarnation of God is simply one of many different prophets; and the Qur’an, instead of being the final definitive disclosure from God, is simply one of many holy books – all of which witness to the reality of a transcendent entity about which we know virtually nothing.

So attractive though the slogans are, the logical implications of Hick’s pluralism are disturbing. First, it excludes from the dialogue almost every traditional religious believer in virtually every tradition. Anyone who believes that the particularities of their tradition capture in a significant way the truth of the ultimate reality is in trouble. This on Hick’s view is forbidden. Second, it makes the content of the dialogue problematic. One does not embark on the dialogue to learn about theology or spirituality in a way that might change one’s view or (better still) one’s relationship with God. Given Hick’s epistemology, one shares ‘cultural pictures’. To reduce the dialogue to anthropology is a tragedy. The third difficulty is on what basis does one exclude those cultures that see the Divine in Aryan Nazi terms? Hick talks about an ethical set of criteria - anything that leads away from Self and towards the Real is valid. However, it is difficult to see how his epistemology enables him to have knowledge of an objective and culturally transcending set of ethical values, but no knowledge of metaphysics.

With Swidler the problematic assumptions involve the post-Enlightenment fiction of an individual disentangled from family, community, and nation. With Hick, the problematic assumptions are epistemological. One further difficulty, which they both share, is a sympathy with a set of universal rules that are true for all people in all places.

It was Alasdair MacIntyre who attacked the conceit of the liberal tradition in seeking a transcendent vantage point from which all decisions can be made. He shows convincingly that the relativist propensities of much modern philosophy (and this would apply to John Hick’s pluralist hypothesis) is due to the setting of an impossible standard for knowledge. Relativism, argues MacIntyre, arises when people insist that rational evaluation of conflicting traditions is only possible when standing outside these traditions; since this is impossible, relativism appears as the only option. MacIntyre commends a different approach. He calls it ‘tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive enquiry’. This approach rejects the expectations of the relativist. It does this in two very important ways: (1) by not expecting to find a neutral standard; and (2) by not expecting to arrive at an all-embracing truth which would be an absolute truth. Underpinning the objections of the relativist is the problem of false expectations. These false expectations have arisen because of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment project was an unattainable quest for absolute certainty.

Although it would be unfair to suggest that Hick and Swidler are both victims of the misguided expectations for knowledge set at the Enlightenment, it is true that they both want to arrive at a ‘hypothesis’ (for Hick) or ‘dialogue rules’ (for Swidler), which are universal and true for everyone. MacIntyre is a helpful critic of such an approach. We need to take the ‘contextual’ much more seriously. And a serious recognition of the tradition-constituted nature of knowing will not require a capitulation to
a pluralist version of relativism, but a willingness to live in our traditions, while striving for dialogue, in a quest for the truth.

One final difficulty with the approach to dialogue in the west needs to be identified. Many critics of pluralism have linked the theology with global capitalism. Kenneth Surin is probably the best illustration. He compares a pluralist theology with the MacDonald’s hamburger. In the same way that the ubiquitous McDonalds undermines distinctive culinary approaches of different cultures, so the pluralist theology of other religions undermines the distinctive features of the religious landscape. In addition, argues Surin, it shares with global capitalism an indifference to the political, economic, and social dimensions to dialogue.23

Many contemporary pluralist theologians resent this charge. In the jointly edited volume by John Hick and Paul Knitter called *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, one of the three bridges across the Rubicon (from exclusivism and inclusivism on one side, to pluralism on the other) was the justice bridge. And Paul Knitter has dedicated much of his latest work to weaving together the demands of justice embodied in the writings of liberation theologians with a pluralist account of religious diversity. Nevertheless, it is true that the pluralist theology of other religions does have ‘imperialist’ aspiration. The charge often made to the traditional Christian (namely that it is all Christ) can also be made to the pluralist theology (namely it is western relativism). The imperialist side to the pluralist hypothesis is not sufficiently acknowledged.

Anyone who has been part of the ‘dialogue’ scene in the United States knows that it has a middle class ‘club’ feel. Perhaps part of the reason for this is that only a person shaped by the dominant narrative of Enlightenment thought can comfortably participate. We have seen in this lecture, the dominance of the post-Enlightenment worldview in three ways. First, the dialogue tends to assume the Enlightenment fiction of the concept of the individual; second, the theology is often parasitic on the epistemological skepticism of the Enlightenment; and finally, the imperialist nature of the discourse has not been sufficiently recognized. In the next lecture, we shall look to the Indian experience for an alternative model of dialogue.

Footnotes:

2. Ibid. p.1
3. Ibid. p.1
4. Ibid. p.1
5. Ibid. p.2
6. Ibid. p.2
7. Ibid. p.2
8. Ibid. p.2
9. Ibid. p.3
10. Ibid. p.3
11. Ibid. p.3
12. Ibid. p.3
13. Ibid. p.3
14. Ibid. p.3
15. I have discussed the work of John Locke in a variety of different places. Some of this summary is taken from my *Theology of Engagement* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2003) p.112. For a further discussion see *Plurality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994).

17. John Hick’s views are found in a number of different writings. The most systematic presentation is in his Gifford Lectures, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1989). Some of this summary is taken from my article on ‘Christianity and Other Religions’ in Gareth Jones (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell 2004) p.405-17.


19. The Muslim Bilal Sambur has written that the concept of an ‘anonymous Christian’ ‘does not have any contribution to interfaith relations, because people have freely chosen religion as their independent religious identity. Furthermore, that concept includes the disrespectful approach to human freedom and humiliates the religion of the other.’ See B. Sambur in ‘Is Interfaith Prayer Possible?’ in *World Faiths Encounter* (23) July 1990, p.30.


22. This is my summary of Alasdair MacIntyre which is also found in *Plurality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994) and *Truth and the Reality of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1998).