Who Should Be Allowed to Participate in Official Interreligious Dialogues?
A Review of Issues

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Abstract: *Interreligious dialogue is an important communications activity that has many of the characteristics and problems of new religious movements. Failure can be devastating, and yet scant critical attention has been devoted to assessing the legitimate qualifications of event participants. Seven dialogic parameters were identified and explicated pertaining to: (a) sanctioning, (b) representation, (c) relevancy, (d) knowledge, (e) technical competence, (f) articulation, and (g) appropriateness. Professional awareness of their range, depth and contours has important ramifications for participant selection, preparation and event organisation.*

Introduction

Nowadays, religious dialoguing is "a necessity and a duty in a pluralist society" (Zago, 2000, p. 16), especially given the demise of church isolationism and official estrangement policies. Indeed, knowingly "to refuse dialogue today would be an act of fundamental human irresponsibility—in Judeo-Christian-Muslin terms, a sin" (Swidler, 1996, p. 16). So, it is not surprising to discover that dialoguing has fast become "an imperative of our common existence and survival" (Rambachan, 1999, p. 56) or for Leonard Swidler (1990b, p. vii) to earnestly argue that the "future offers two alternatives: death or dialogue. This statement is not over-dramatization." Prof. Swidler envisaged the demise of the "Age of Monologue" and the rise of the "Age of Dialogue" because of the interpenetration of the world's peoples and their problems. Indeed, it is also the inbreaking "Age of Global Dialogue" given the historical transformation of Christendom into Western Civilization and now into Global Civilization (Swidler, 1996, p. 1).

Dialoguing is certainly a tough job demanding "the intellectual, moral, and, at the limit, religious ability to struggle to hear another and to respond. To respond critically, and even suspiciously when necessary" (Tracy, 1990, p. 4). There are many problems with the selection, nature and preparation of dialogue participants, but despite its obviousness, scant critical attention has been devoted to this need. Seven dialogic parameters were identified within the literature, namely: (a) Participant Sanctioning: Official Recognition, (b) Representation: Are Participants Truly Faithful to the Faith?, (c) Relevancy: Insiders or Outsiders of the Faith?, (d) Knowledgeable: Understanding Oneself and the Other, (e) Technical Competence: Argumentation and Presentation Skills, (f) Articulate: Knowing the Language of the Dialogue, and (g) Appropriateness: Issues of Dress and Other

Nonverbal Behaviours. The following is a brief explication of these seven issues.

Participant Sanctioning: Official Recognition

Legitimate dialogue requires participants who are carefully selected, approved and officially sanctioned by the appropriate authorities, whether by Bishop, congregation, roshi, Bet Din, Central Committee etc. They must be "capable of dialogue" to use Jürgen Moltmann's (2000, p. 18) phrase. That is, "interest in the other religion, an open-minded awareness of its different life, and the will to live together - what Theo Sundermeier calls 'convivence' (Spanish *convivencia*)." Why? To ensure the success of the specific dialogue, the dialogic enterprise, and the reputation of the faiths involved. As Prof. Eric J. Sharpe (1992) pointed out:

> *To most Christians, a Hindu is a Hindu is a Hindu. No doubt to most Hindus, there would be no appreciable difference between Ian Paisley and Cardinal Ratzinger. The terms of the dialogue, however, are dictated not by what the textbooks tell you that each religion is or ought to be, but by who happens to be doing the talking, and under what conditions (p. 231).*

Official religious dialogue is best viewed as a corporate activity where the chosen dialoguer **is** the faith, organisationally speaking. It is imperative that the appointee(s) "come to the dialogue as persons somehow significantly identified with a religious [or ideological] community" (Swidler, 1982, p. 10). If "a person is, for example, neither a Lutheran or a Jew, s/he could not engage in a specifically Lutheran-Jewish dialogue" (Swidler, 1990c, p. 59). The chosen representatives must also have the power commensurate with the task to avoid counter-productivity issues. Indeed:

> *It is a frequent experience that groups with a mandate from their communities to engage in dialogue draw up a coherent and far-reaching statement that represents real progress in mutual understanding among the partners to the dialogue, only to find at the end of their labors that the respective mandating authorities in their own communities will not approve the statement. Such statements are then frequently reduced to rather unsatisfactory evasions and compromises that were already in vogue before the dialogue was set up (Hellwig, 1982, p. 78).*

The need for official authorisations was specifically recommended by the Aarhus Workshop (1978) regarding the Christian-Marxist dialogue:

> *Only if the church has participatory exercise of power and decision-making will it have the internal and external authority to engage in critical involvement with Marxism. It will then create a publicly visible example which will set a criterion for the whole of society. It will witness in its life to the reality of "the universal priesthood of the baptized" it professes (p. 77).*

This authorisation principle also applies to the integrity of the delegates chosen because anyone "who thinks they will be betraying their faith cannot and should not enter the dialogue" (Coff, 1989, p. 209). Regrettably, there are scant case reports but at least one tantalisingly brief, unexplicated aside, namely: "I also include the sufferings of those Christians and Marxists who entered into dialogue "without permission" by their respective establishments" (Romic, 1978, pp. 123-124).

Rev. Crow Jr. (2000, p. 96) hinted at another source of participant difficulty when he advised potential career dialoguers: "Do not seek or yearn for any exalted position in the ecumenical movement until you are seventy years of age. In the meantime, practice humility, patience, and evangelization." Overall, the "problem of Christian faith in a religiously plural world cannot be solved by ex-Christians learning to relate to ex-Jews, ex-Buddhists, ex-Muslims, or ex-anything else, in the name of conceptions that do not take these traditions seriously" (Dawe, 1978, p. 17).

Representation: Are Participants Truly Faithful to the Faith?

Delegates must, in some fundamental way, truly represent their faiths and be comfortable in that role, or as Jürgen Moltmann (2000) put it:

> *Only people who have arrived at a firm standpoint in their own religion, and who enter into dialogue with the resulting self-confidence, merit dialogue. It is only if we are at home in our own religion that we shall be able to encounter the religion of someone else" (pp. 18-19).*

Consequently, one needs to ask: "who are these dialogue partners? Are they the elite and the intellectuals? Do they really represent their societies or are they only fans of dialogue?" (Younan, 1995, p. 17). This is important because "no dialogue partners can possibly speak for all the segments of Buddhism any more than any Christian theologian can speak for all branches of Christianity" (Cobb Jr., 1982, pp. x-xi). After all:

> *...there are a host of different versions of both Islam and Christianity and no single individual adherent of either religion is fully representative of the entire spectrum. There is all the more reason, therefore, for inter-religious dialogue on the international level to be conducted between and among representative bodies of the religions concerned (Brockway, 1984, p. 14).*

As Prof. Harvey Cox (1989) put it:

> *...in the ideal interreligious dialogue, we will have all the Hindus on one side of the table, all the Christians on another side, all the Jews on a third, and all the Muslims at a fourth. The truth is that there are elements within any of these movements that are more like those within another tradition than they are like certain elements within their own (p. 60).*

Finding delegates who are representative, loyal, and follow the religious party line is not going to be easy. As evidenced by "the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith [who] has declared that Professors Hans Kung and Charles Curran are no longer considered Catholic theologians" (Swidler, 1990c, p. 60).

Nor is it too surprising to hear that "the processes of official dialogue or negotiation between denominations must be entrusted to relatively small numbers of elected or appointed persons" (Black, 1991, p. 7), and/or "with small groups that represent the grassroots" (Younan, 1995, p. 17). It is certainly counterproductive having persons attend conferences representing "the faith" when they are only a minor, non-representative faction. It would give a misleading, inaccurate and distorted picture of the faith *per se*, especially to those unfamiliar with the religion in question, let

alone its various shadings and off-shoots. For example:

> *When a Zoroastrian approaches the question of dialogue with another religion, due attention has to be paid to the divergent currents of interpretations prevalent in the Zoroastrian tradition itself. There are some who interpret texts philologically, others esoterically. Theosophists, or those influenced by Hindu philosophy, would explain Zoroastrianism from their particular perspective. It is persistent [sic] to know who the spokesman is (Dhalla, 1989, p. 40).*

Of course, the same rule applies to dialogue with non-religious ideologies:

> *As with their secular counterparts, secular ideologies exist in a variety of subtraditions...the doctrines of Soviet Marxism diverge from those of Maoist China or Albania; the humanism of Julian Huxley (with its emphasis on evolution) differs from the more 'literary', symbol-oriented outlook of Jungian psychoanalysis; the existentialism of Heidegger is very different from the more socially activist version of Satre (Smart, 1991, p. 170).*

Even within a secular ideology, there can be a diversity of focuses, as occurred during the 1986 Catholic-Marxist dialogue in Budapest:

> *The first things that struck the Catholics was the great variety of positions among their Marxists partners--a variety unthinkable fifteen years ago. Some Marxists were ready to admit the presence of injustices, inequalities and the erosion of moral values in Socialist societies. Some questioned Communist certainties like the all-sufficiency of science and the adequacy of mere structural changes (one of the participants had publicly questioned, prior to the meetings, the justice of imposing a one-party dictatorship). Some of the Marxists tended to reach back to the young Marx, to stress the humanist aspect of Marxism rather than its scientific nature, to give precedence to the development of the human person and society over class-warfare and to the interests of the entire humanity over those of one particular class (Pereira, 1987, p. 274).*

Similar concerns were raised with new religious movements:

> *...any individual Methodist may or may not conform (intellectually) to the norms of evangelical Arminianism or (ethically) to the well-known taboos on the use of alcohol or tobacco, so individual Unificationists may be (intellectually) more or less clear on the Divine Principle or (ethically) more or less committed to the marriage customs of that church...No one person anywhere is the embodiment of or personification of ideas or beliefs that are set out systematically in text books for the convenience of students and other interested outsiders (Cracknell, 1987, pp. 158-159).*

Indeed, why "should the dialogues invite only the modernized version of religions whose representatives may be merely a minority of enlightened liberals which scarcely any religious constituency to speak of?" (Braaten, 1992, p. 10).

Do these invited representatives "think of themselves as 'representative' at all, or do they state that it is a very personal voice with which they speak, even though an important part of that voice is their religious affiliation within a cumulative tradition" (Morgan, 1995, p. 162)? As Munib A. Younan (1995) argued:

> I believe that the future fruitful dialogue must involve the different representation that reflects the reality of the society. To have people who represent their own ideas and agreed on every item on the agenda is not a healthy dialogue, but is rather a monologue or deceptive and will not proliferate justice, peace and reconciliation. It is now time to involve those that represent the proponents and opponents in one's society (p. 17).

It is somewhat ironic that the most qualified faith representatives, its leaders, are ineligible for dialoguing precisely because of their leadership status:

> Who participates in authentic interreligious dialogue? Do we ever see the Pope sitting down with the Ayatollah, or either sharing with the Chief Rabbis of Israel? No, we do not. Why? Because these men cannot accept "Not in Heaven" [recognising their religion's limitations] as a prerequisite for genuine dialogue. As defenders of particular and mutually exclusive faith traditions, the best these men could hope for is a cordial exchange of doctrine (Shapiro, 1989, p. 34).

It was a point demonstrated by the leader of the Unification Church, Rev. Sun Myung Moon when he addressed an interreligious event sponsored by his Church:

> Moon's own speech at the Assembly bore more than a hint of a Unificationist agenda. He saw religions aimed at an ideal individual, family, nation, and world (the four stages of restoration), declaring that the salvation of fallen humanity will be completed by God's providence through the Messiah. (One presumes he was referring to himself). Of course, it could be argued that Moon, like other religious leaders, was exercising his right to present his own religious heritage (Moss & Chryssides, 1986, p. 13).

As all true believers should be allowed too! Even the officially approved representatives are rarely ever the faith's establishment spokespersons:

> ...genuine dialoguers, while deeply rooted in their faith, are the risk takers, the radicals, the prophets who are not afraid to affirm wonder wherever it is revealed. While participants may be and often are abbots, roshis, gurus, priests, imams, established scholars, rabbis, and others whose positions in their respective communities may well be exalted, they are nonetheless not the official spokespersons of their faith. They represent not so much the tradition to which they belong, but themselves and the spiritual quest they personally undertake...Genuine dialoguers are rare and wonderful people (Shapiro, 1989, p. 35).

This radicalisation phenomenon was also noted during one Marxist-Christian dialogue:

> One ought to mention that the "revisionist" Marxists are the ones who support the dialogue most ardently. They are sometimes very popular, but they are rarely in the position to make an impact in their own societies, because they are very definitely opposed in those efforts by

the orthodox Marxists (Romic, 1978, p. 124).

Kate Zebiri (1997) noted how Muslim-Christian dialogues could be politically constricted and internally biased by liberals:

...the few Muslim initiatives have tended to be on the official government level, for example in Libya, Tunisia and Jordan. The problem of representation is not easy to resolve on the Muslim side; governments do not necessarily have strong Islamic credibility, the 'ulama' (Muslim religious scholars) are not always willing to participate, and when they do they are often either representing their governments or constrained by government views. Most of those who have participated as individuals have been from the liberal end of the Islamic spectrum, often resident in the West or having spent time there (pp. 35-36).

Similar points were made by John Baldock (1994), Secretary General World Conference on Religion and Peace/Australia, which had important public relations consequences because of it:

Many senior Church leaders avoid interreligious forums, as do some from other faiths who are concerned to maintain factional loyalties...there is also a tendency in many denominations to leave interreligious dialogue to those who are somewhat marginal within their own structures. While obviously there are considerable time demands upon senior religious leaders, this often creates a disparity in interfaith meetings. Some participants may hold considerable representative status, while others will represent virtually no one at all. It can also create an impression that the Churches are not really committed to building strong relationships between faith communities, otherwise more senior representatives would be found (p. 27).

Peggy Morgan (1995) also noted this marginalisation effect:

If an invitation arrives on the desk of the Archbishop of Canterbury for a member of the Church of England to attend, will the person who volunteers or who is chosen to go be on the periphery of the main tradition of that Church...In many religious communities interfaith activity is not of central concern and those who are involved may well be on the boundaries of their tradition...It does not mean, however, that the Anglican, for example, at an interfaith gathering, may be an unusual Anglican, but may or may not choose to identify herself in those terms (p. 162).

Interestingly, Marcus Braybrooke (1993, p. 105) urged dialoguers to become aware of being marginalised/alienated from their own tradition. Not only are marginalised persons chosen by their faiths as dialoguers because of their marginality, but in Braybrooke's view, dialoguing can also make them marginalised. Such behaviour can also be a testing-the-water engagement tactic:

...it is important to be aware that, especially in the initial stages of any interreligious, interideological dialogue, it is very likely that the literally ec-centric members of religious, ideological communities will be the ones who will have the interest and ability to enter into dialogue; the more centrist persons will do so only after the dialogue has proved safe for the mainline, official elements to venture into (Swidler, 1990c, p. 60).

Both marginalisation and caution is to be expected simply because dialogue may mean transformation and growth, but it should not be necessarily feared.

John Baldock (1994) also raised the issue of representation. He asked whether the organisers of an interreligious dialogue event should focus upon either: (a) involving people of goodwill but with little or no representative status; or (b) bringing together those in established leadership positions (presumably with high representative status). Regrettably, no mention is made of whether these established leaders with high representative status are of goodwill, but from his comment that "experience would suggest that it is difficult to combine both" (p. 27), it appears that he does not think so. This is a pity because having established leaders with high representative status who are also of goodwill would be the obvious dialoguer choice. Nevertheless, he does raise a very interesting organisational idea, namely, that "a range of forums be organised involving people at different levels of denominational status, enabling participation for all those willing to meet" (Baldock, 1994, p. 27).

Although Secretary General Baldock (1994) considered forum ranges would diminish the organisations human and financial resources, the idea has intrinsic merit because it allows the dialogue impulse to be fostered and nurtured in practice (instead of pleasing PR rhetoric). It also provides valuable levels of dialogue experience for those willing, especially given the dearth of dialogue training courses. Indeed, if each denomination adopted common standards of stratified dialoguing it would ensure quality control and provide a graduated training ground that could accommodate every skill level and aspiration. Baldock (1994) also raised the issue of women and representation:

> *Most leadership positions within the various faith communities are held by men, also raising the question of whether it is important to involve senior religious women in gatherings among denominational leaders. This requires, however, a decision about who are the most appropriate women to involve. Should it be the head of a religious women's organisation, or someone whose leadership is recognised according to different criteria? (p. 27).*

The answer of course should be determined internally by the faiths themselves. However, as Harvey Cox (1989, pp. 57-58) predicted: "I am convinced that, when women become full partners, the interreligious dialogue will change, so much so that what is now going on will be regarded as only an insufficient and misleading beginning."

Peggy Morgan (1995, p. 162) likewise noted similar gender disparities: "If the participants are mainly leaders it is almost certain that there will be many fewer women than is typical of actual membership within traditions." Ursula King (1998, p. 44) was also justifiably annoyed because of women's invisibility at official dialogue events: "At present these [women's own voices] are simply unheard and presumed to be included under whatever men have to say about dialogue." This problem is compounded when women are actively excluded. "Another example [of shock and exclusion] was that of two distinguished religious scholars dialoguing with each other on spirituality, where one at least was adamant in not admitting a woman, however much experienced in meditation and interfaith encounters, to this exclusive male dialogue." It resulted in what the

French call *un dialogue des sourds* (a dialogue of the deaf) (King, 1998, p. 43).

Although this may be demographically true, imposing gender requirements under whatever flavour of political correctness is current would be beyond the legitimate scope of dialogue organisers. However, it is an important topic to raise with the faiths themselves as they discuss what dialogue is and should be about. Overall, achieving a balance between bureaucratically sanctioned authorisation, personalistic radicalism, marginality, representative status and gender bias, are matters dialogue organisers and participants need to be cognisant of.

Relevancy: Insiders or Outsiders of the Faith?

As a corollary of the above, faiths have to decide if their official representatives, these "unusual" (Morgan, 1995, p. 162), "rare and wonderful" (Shapiro, 1989, p. 35) people are **insiders** of the faith (e.g., priests, active laity) or **outsiders** of the faith (e.g., professors of religion, but not members, or ex-members of the faith). As John B. Cobb Jr. (1982, p. x) argued: "Too often in this country the dialogue with representatives of other traditions has been in this way handed over to historians of religion, many of whom are not committed to the Christian faith and its fresh articulation." As Sallie B. King (1990) argued:

> *Clearly, someone who has spent thirty years as a Zen master has the authority to speak for the tradition, even if she is willing to acknowledge that exposure to Christianity has made her see things in an altered light. The same applies to someone who has seminary training, ordination, and thirty years in the ministry, or someone with a Ph.D. and personal commitment in Christian theology or Buddhism (p. 124).*

Yet, it is a decision that goes to the heart of dialoguing.

Whether insiders or outsiders are ultimately chosen as representatives, they must at least think/believe/behave like true religious insiders. Because "a theologian enters the Buddhist-Christian dialogue not as a cultural anthropologist nor even as a philosopher but as a committed Christian theologian" (Tracy, 1990, p. 73). Indeed, Stanley J. Samartha (1981, p. 43) argued that "people who enter into serious dialogue should do so on the basis of commitments to their respective faiths is obvious. The freedom to be committed and to be open is the prerequisite of genuine dialogue," as also advocated by Marcus Braybrooke (1993, p. 105) who considered it vital that dialoguers "be secure in their own faith."

> *Only when **a** religion has become **my** religion does the discussion about the truth reach its deepest depths. Truth for me, therefore, means **my faith**, just as for the Jew and the Muslim, Judaism and Islam, and for the Hindu and the Buddhist, Hinduism and Buddhism, are **their** religion, **their** faith, and thereby **the** truth (Kung, 1988, p. 246).*

Maurice Friedman (1987) wanted to extend the insider/outsider distinction beyond card-carrying, organisational commitments to delegates who also actively **lived** their faith:

> *There has thrived in our day, unfortunately, a form of pseudo-dialogue in which official representatives of religions carry on official dialogues that are neither genuine meetings of religions, for religions cannot met, nor genuine meetings of persons because these persons*

speak only for their social role and do not stand behind what they say with their own persons (p. 104).

Overall, the weight of opinion tends to favour having committed insiders because:

The best dialogue occurs when the partners are deeply convinced of many things. Truth is best approached not by the absence of convictions but by submitting strong convictions to the light of criticism. When one is really convinced, one does not fear such criticism or expect, in advance, that criticism will greatly alter the conviction (Cobb Jr., 1982, p. 45).

Getting committed delegates who lived their faith and had both religious and academic qualifications would be ideal (i.e., a priest-professor like Dr. Andrew Greeley). Alternatively, as a compromise, a team dialogue approach using both elements (i.e., a priest along side a vetted sympathetic professor). However, even here, care has to be taken because in reality, only a Jew can know what it is like to be a Jew. As Jean-Claude Basset (1992, p. 37) stipulated in his 5th decalogue dialogue rule: "There is no real inter-religious dialogue without having one's roots in a given tradition and at the same time being open to others." Since we live in an imperfect world, selecting the best person to attend official events will always be difficult, and to varying degrees, a compromise choice. As Prof. Sharpe (1992, p. 233) noted: "genuine dialogue in depth between devotees is, I am sure, a comparative rarity. Often what we have instead is a semi-secular dialogue among the partly secularized, and between the secular fringe of the Church and the post-Christian world out there."

Such delegate choices will have far reaching ramifications, especially for minority faiths (e.g., Tibetan Buddhism) who may not have articulate sacred servants who speak the language of the dialogue (e.g., English). Therefore, using a professor of religion who speaks English **and** Tibetan, and can perform as translator, would be better than having an inarticulate religious member, or no dialogue member at all! This arrangement can effectively overcome many of the bureaucratic problems already highlighted. As an important aside however, it is:

...wrong for anglophone scholars to presume that all interreligious dialogues should be carried out in English. A Hindu-Christian dialogue, e.g., could be carried out in Hindi, Tamil, or another Indian language or in two completely different languages. The dialogue partners should avoid imposing their own language on the other as the lingua of the dialogue (Dunbar, 1998, p. 466).

Interestingly, this team approach would allow Martin Buber's 5th and 6th criteria for authentic dialogue, namely:

Genuine dialogue does not require that everyone present has to speak, but that no one can be there as a mere observer. Each must be ready to share with the others, and no one can know in advance that he or she will have something to say. Genuine dialogue can be either spoken or silent. Its essence lies in the fact that each participant turns to the others with the intention of establishing a living mutual relationship (Shapiro, 1989, p. 33).

This genuine dialogue could be achieved because these speaker and observer roles (i.e., speaking and silence behaviours) are being reciprocally shared by the team members, which in a one-to-one

situation could have caused offence and/or stalled the dialogue. For example, Participant-A (Christian) speaks their truth and awaits a response from Participant-B (Buddhist) who sits silently, does not answer, and only succeeds in worrying and possibly offending their dialogue partner by the apparent inaction, or presumed lack of attentiveness. With team dialoguing, delegates can alternate between speaking and silent contemplation without causing offence, and the more team members, the less odious the individual personal stress. For example, J. L. Sandidge (1992, pp. 240, 241) reported how the Roman Catholic-Classical Pentecostal dialogue initially agreed that each "side would bring nine persons to the dialogue table," later upgraded to 12-15 Pentecostal observers with limited participation roles. However, the size of the panel should not become too unwieldy and compromise the efficacy of the dialogue.

If the issue is between: (a) having dialogue sessions (however imperfect); or (b) not having dialogue sessions (because perfection cannot be achieved) then the former is usually preferable, as Prof. Sharpe (1992) grudgingly admitted:

> *Of course, a semi-secular Christian will be able to meet and converse with a semi-secular Hindu about matters of secular concern, without loss of temper or face on either side. If that is the best we can manage, or that circumstances permit, then at least it is better than open conflict. Where it squares with that which we are sometimes tempered to claim about dialogue, is another matter entirely (pp. 233-234).*

And, of course, whether dialogue perfection can ever exist is another matter entirely, but both Sharpe (1992, p. 233) and Tracy (1990, p. 4) acknowledged the rarity of genuine, in-depth dialogue, and so one has to make the best of all possible worlds. The interesting question of if and how members of religious dialoguing bodies should or should not engage one another is another fruitful area for investigation but currently beyond the scope of this work.

Knowledgeable: Understanding Oneself and the Other

While acknowledging Stanley J. Samartha's (1981, p. 42) claim that "the deepest truths of any religion cannot be distilled into clear, rational, logical, and self-evident propositions to be compared with the truth of another religion," one still has to act clearly, rationally and logically when dialoguing. Why? Because "the sincerity of peoples engaged in dialogue...[does] not necessarily build up an uncontested credibility of their efforts, nor...[does] it guarantee their efficiency" (Mitri, 1995, p. 22). "The 'ordinary laypeople', whether men or women, are the more typical numerically and may therefore be deemed to have the most significant voices but may or may not be well-informed enough to make a contribution" (Morgan, 1995, p. 162). Scott Daniel Dunbar (1998, p. 466) even suggested that "scholars should enter into dialogues with the greatest breadth of participants possible...including children, despite obvious disparities in knowledge." Leonard Swidler (1990c, p. 60) similarly argued that: "Dialogue should involve every level of the religious, ideological communities, all the way down to the "persons in the pews.""

Although they are interesting inclusivist sentiments, which **does** have a place during the entire life cycle of interfaith communications, it is not particular useful advice for formal, official dialoguing. The allegedly "exclusionary and elitist" (Dunbar, 1998, p. 466) nature of eschewing children and the average person in the pews is, in reality, just basic fairness:

Surely no one would want to--or at least, no one should want to--restrict thinking to the popular level. That would run counter to the nature of our humanity, and indeed would be inimical to the welfare of humankind...clearly dialogue must be conducted on all levels of human experience and most certainly on the highest possible level, for it is precisely there that many of the breakthroughs have occurred and will continue to occur, which then will greatly liberate the dialogue at the other levels (Swidler, 1990a, pp. 68-69).

Nor does Dunbar's (1998, p. 466) subsequent argument help resolve the root inequality, namely: "I agree that dialogue should be between equals only in the sense that all participants are equally teachers and learners." This is pure semantics and no solution at all because **everyone** is a teacher and learner in some regard, but does that make them all equal? No! The logical gap here is frequently insurmountable. Dunbar (1998, p. 466) failed in his own goal of keeping "scholars on the bridge of dialogue instead of the waters of debate." This lends weight to Pim Valkenberg's (2000, p. 109) suspicion that "the word "dialogue" can easily be exploited to cover up a situation where equality is absent and even unwelcome."

Officially-selected and approved delegates must be well-informed and competent enough to represent their faiths credibly. This entails: (a) being knowledgeable about their partner's dogmas, history, sensitivities, and even have "expertise in ethical issues" (Swan, 1998, p. 356); (b) providing competent presentation of their faith's propositions; and (c) having dialogue specialists, like D. C. Mulder (2000, p. 100) who reported: "I limit myself to the relation between Christians and Jews and between Christians and Muslims." Indeed:

In interfaith dialogue participants speak responsibly as representatives of their communions; therefore they should have thorough knowledge of what their communions teach, and should refuse to sacrifice convictions in the interest of a superficial unity (Early, 1979, pp. 1820-1821).

(See also Baumer-Despeigne, 1989, p. 70; Krieger, 1993, p. 352; Lee, 1991, p. 187). It is certainly counterproductive sending delegates if they cannot represent the faith properly. It would be a dialogue sham because:

Openness without the fulcrum of prior religious self-awareness or faith commitments can weigh nothing in the balance. It is like sewing a piece of cloth with no knot in the thread. One sews and sews, but no seam results. In the end, one is left with the separate pieces of cloth, thread and needle (Swearer, 1977, p. 42).

Leonard Swidler (1982, p. 11) even argued that it was "mandatory that each dialogue partner herself define what it means to be an authentic member of her own tradition."

Not only must one understand one's own faith, the dialoguer must have appropriate knowledge of the Other's faith, if for no other reason than to allow meaningful dialogue. This requirement was embodied in Paul Mojzes's (1978, p. 10) 2nd and 4th ground rules, namely: "Have a preliminary knowledge of your partner and the position with which you are going to dialogue," and "Be well informed about the topic being discussed and present it clearly." It was also an essential requirement for Heinrich Dumoulin (1974, p. 37) who argued that: "An accurate knowledge of other religions is

necessary for the dialogue. Naturally, the dialogue ought to correct, supplement and enrich this knowledge. But a certain preliminary understanding is the indispensable prerequisite for a useful dialogue." Interestingly, Prof. Sharpe (1974) considered it important to also know the Other intuitively:

> It is all very well to say that it is more important for the Christian to meet the Hindu as a man than to meet the man as a Hindu; but the man **is** a Hindu, and possesses (if this is the right word) a 'Hindu mind', which needs to be understood intellectually, as well as perceived intuitively (pp. 84-85).

The general knowledge requirement was also inherent in the conclusion of the Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (1989, p. 110): "We need to be conscientized and helped to free ourselves from prejudices, attitudes of self-defence, and of seeking merely our own benefit by becoming open to the positive values in other religions, and ready to learn from them." For Reender Kranenborg (1987, p. 129), this ready-to-learn-from-them attitude required that the church "should meet and speak with the adherents of the NRMs [New Religious Movements] directly and read carefully the literature they themselves produce." Why? Because many reviewers had never met any of the groups or read any of their literature, just secondary sources and ill-informed opinions! Technically, they are speaking from a position of ignorance.

A similar hands-on attitude was advocated by Prof. Sharpe (1977). He required dialoguers to have a variety of other faith friends, and more importantly, direct personal experiences that went beyond the world of books. Because:

> ...a Christian missionary who has spent half a lifetime working among the 'popular' Hinduism of the villages of Tamil Nadu has a different image of the encounter from that of the Western student, whether liberal, Barthian, Neo-Thomist or whatever, who has never set foot in India, but who is attracted by certain of the propositions of Advaita Vedanta (p. 133).

In short, advocating experience of the real Other, as opposed to a projected Other; which had driven David Tracy's (1990, p. 4) ten year passion for interreligious dialogue. Obviously, Prof. Sharpe (1992) felt strong about it because he repeated the sentiment:

> ...a fair proportion of recent Christian literature on the subject [theories of dialogue] seems to have been put together by people who appear never to have lived outside a Christian milieu, and who may have no Hindu, Muslim, Jewish or Buddhist friends...in many cases they have lived in a modern Western post-Christian milieu, most commonly that of the secular university (I am tempted to say, with the seminary running a close second)... (p. 233).

This assessment still rings uncomfortably true today.

The reporting of other faith friends within the literature is not very common, but when it does occur it can be delightful (see Gordis, 1991, p. 467). Indeed, having interreligious friendships was deemed a new Christian theological virtue by James L. Fredericks (1998, p. 164) because these friends contributed to the "decentering of the ego, and the expansion of our horizons...[it] exposes our

presuppositions and confronts us with our misperceptions." The Other's "new stories are a *tremendum* and also a *fascinans*... [with the] power to redirect our doing and stimulate our imagining. In this way, the strangeness of the stranger itself can become for us a resource for the cultivation of our souls and the appropriation of truth" (p. 165).

Such friendships are also important pragmatically. An "ecumenical initiative rarely makes significant progress without the bonds of friendship and collegiality...Through genuine friendship the "change of heart" which Vatican II placed at the center of ecumenism, is able to happen and its fruits are able to become visible" (Crow, 2000, p. 97). After all, "dialogue can only take place among persons; systems cannot converse with one another" (Burrell, 2000, p. 44). Indeed, for earnest Christians, Jesus considered his followers not as servants but as friends (John 15:15 KJV), but before one can be Jesus's friend one must learn to befriend one another (1 John 4:21 KJV). So, why not adopt this Nazarene strategy to interreligious dialogue? As Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1991, p. 8) argued: "No one should, in my view, have any views on any other aspect of interreligious questions until he or she has friends among them."

Cultivating personal friendships while pursuing the mutually shared commitment to truth is also a practical virtue. Why? Because it enriches our faith journey, the Other is now transformed into a valuable companion instead of a rival, and it can be done **without** ceasing to be the Other (i.e., no faith dilution nor stressful conversion or colonising demands). As companion-friends, we are now required to adopt the spirit of civility, correct understanding, and cooperation. These are positive deeds which will speak far louder than promising words. Indeed, David B. Burrell (2000) is in concert with this contention and also argued that friendship is the postmodern solution to the spectre of relativism:

> I have focused on friendship as a prerequisite for the quality of intersubjectivity which can come to substitute for objectivity in a postmodern context. Yet even more internally...the journey shared with friends becomes a paradigm of that quest for truth which displays to us the ubiquity and necessity of analogous discourse in negotiating the way set out before us (p. 62).

While John B. Cobb Jr. (1982) acknowledged the value of knowing the Other, he did not want participants to know **too** much about the Other:

> Prior knowledge of the religious tradition from which the other speaks is beneficial to dialogue. But it is a mistake to demand too much here. If only those Christians who are scholars in the field of Islamics take part in dialogue with Muslims, the deeper purposes of dialogue are unlikely to be realized...Dialogue with Buddhism is not primarily the province of Buddhologists but rather of Christian theologians who are, for the most part, but little informed about the Buddhist traditions (p. x).

It strongly appears that these "unusual" (Morgan, 1995, p. 162), "rare and wonderful" (Shapiro, 1989, p. 35) dialoguers are becoming even more unusual, rare and wonderful if they have to walk a tightrope between: (a) specialist knowledge of the Other; and (b) neo-ignorance, which has an uncomfortable anti-growth element about it. However, there is merit in going beyond exchanges between specialists to where it is putatively needed, the benighted. Interestingly, Heinrich Dumoulin

(1974, p. 37) had prefigured Rabbi Shapiro's concern two decades earlier when he argued that: "Interest and study are required to fulfil this condition [accurate knowledge of other religions], and only a limited number of adherents of the various religions will be able to qualify." This may simply have to be accepted for now.

Technical Competence: Argumentation and Presentation Skills

As an above corollary, dialoguers should know how to articulate their points convincingly, appropriately and effectively. If for no other reason than because poor "communication skills in listening, speaking and questioning cause communication barriers" (Dwyer, 1993, p. 14). For example, during the 1986 Catholic-Marxist Dialogue in Budapest:

> *...the dialogue was defective from both sides. At times, it was more parallel discourse than dialogue. Language--not only in a grammatical sense--sometimes seems to have posed a barrier. Some of the questions asked were irrelevant, leading to tangential points or were needlessly embarrassing (Pereira, 1987, p. 273).*

It is of little benefit having knowledgeable and approved representatives if they cannot do anything constructive with their knowledge and authority.

In fact, many "ordinary Jews or Christians lack the skills necessary to engage in a deeper, theological dialogue, and are rightly wary of setting their faith at risk in a confusing enterprise" (Braybrooke, 1993, p. 105). There is also little benefit having knowledgeable and approved faith representatives who are not comparable scholastically because: "Dialogue...presupposes egalitarianism and what one might call horizontal communication between equals" (Sharpe, 1992, p. 230), as embodied in Leonard Swidler's (1983) 7th commandment:

> *Dialogue can take place between equals, or* par cum pari *as Vatican II put it. This means that not only can there be no dialogue between a skilled scholar and a "person in the pew" type (at most there can only be a garnering of data in the manner of an interrogation), but also there can be no such thing as one-way dialogue (p. 3).*

Marcus Braybrooke (1993, p. 105) likewise considered this *par cum pari* requirement to be important: "Dialogue needs also to be of equals, that is to say of those with similar levels of scholarship and study." Stanley J. Samartha (1981, p. viii) similarly argued that practical dialogue required intra-community preparation. Presumably as confidence building warm-ups: "Dialogue between communities of faith separated from each other for so long is unlikely to bear much fruit without some dialogue within particular communities of faith as preparation for encounters." Skills in public speaking, debating and negotiation tactics are obvious advantages here.

Indeed, Leonard Swidler (1988) took the competency notion further by advocating a Lawrence Kohlberg analysis of their cognitive, moral judgement, and faith-ideology development. As such, all dialogue participants should be at postconventional stage five:

> *...so as to avoid unwarranted expectations - and subsequent disillusionment. Being forewarned about what stage potential dialogue participants are at, a sensitive person should be able to help all concerned to work their way through the necessary prolegomena*

more successfully, and perhaps even more rapidly (p. 39).

If this approach is seriously adopted it might open the floodgates to the entire psychologist's battery of psychometric tests (e.g., IQ, personality, interest, attitude).

It is perhaps no accident that the most prolific dialoguers are Christians, Jews and Buddhists because they regularly engage in dialectics during their socio-religious training. As Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, recounted concerning the Tibetan system of monastic education:

> *Wit is an important part of these debates and high merit is earned by turning your opponent's postulates to your own humorous advantage. This makes dialectics a popular form of entertainment even amongst uneducated Tibetans who, although they might not follow the intellectual acrobatics involved, can still appreciate the fun and the spectacle. In the old days, it was not unusual to see nomads and other country people from far outside Lhasa spend part of their day watching learned debates in the courtyard of a monastery. A monk's ability at this unique form of disputation is the criterion by which his intellectual achievements are judged (Gyatso, 1990, p. 26).*

Making fun of your dialogue partner during an interreligious event would certainly **not** be approved of, but if wit and humour can be injected in a spirit of good will, then so much the better. No one seriously expects dialogues to be dry, humourless events, or would want them to be, indeed, to "insist that dialogue must always be about clear and distinct ideas is to impose a narrowly Western verbal-doctrinal style. What occurs, then, is nothing but a more subtle form of religious imperialism. Exchanging jokes and anecdotes is also a form of dialogue" (Cox, 1989, p. 15).

Admittedly, orientating to this humorous focus may require patience, as evidenced by Harvey Cox (1989):

> *When I was living among Tibetan Buddhists, for example, it took me some time to appreciate the frolic-some way they approach even the deepest tenets of their faith. They sometimes called it "crazy wisdom." I found that, as a Christian, I eventually had to lay aside the notion that dialogue must always be serious...Perhaps we need to place the "theology of play" at the service of interfaith encounter...(p. 14).*

Indeed, it can be a very serious dialogue tool. "Playfullness is a practical way to surrender...the presuppositions that have become established in our lives in order to experiment with new possibilities of identity and action" (Fredericks, 1998, p. 166), including interreligious reflection, acknowledgment and self-realisation. In fact, during playful:

> *...interreligious friendships, religious traditions become present to us in the spontaneity of human speech and action and are no longer constrained by the limits of the text. The truths of religion cannot be exhausted by inscription. Friendship between followers of different traditions helps us to resist the tendency to reduce religious forms of life to textuality. In the friend, the religious Other is present not as an abstraction on paper but as an embodied truth in all its historical ambiguity...within its living, existential context (Fredericks, 1998, pp. 167-168).*

If dialoguers are not as well prepared as their partners per session, then all might come to naught, as embodied in Raimundo Panikkar's (1975, p. 408) II:1 principle: "There must be equal preparation from both sides, both theologically and culturally. Otherwise, misunderstandings very easily creep in." However, even this preparation requirement is not without its own inherent problems. For example, Mary Hall (1987, p. 29) reported how her attempts at thorough dialogue preparation resulted in less than gracious suspicions about her personal integrity: "During the preparation of these [reports] the group leaders visited me regularly, and one morning a Jewish neighbour asked me, very seriously and politely, what was the reason for the frequent visits of coloured gentlemen with briefcases to my flat!" The religious suspect was now a sexual suspect.

Articulate: Knowing the Language of the Dialogue

Participants should be capable of delivering their messages articulately, as distinct from knowledgeably, emotionally or rhetorically, so that others can understand them. It is counterproductive using such complex arguments and arcane terminology that understanding is thwarted. As Fr. Walter Fernandes (1995, p. 95) advised concerning dialogue with the poor, it should be "in the language they understand," no doubt emulating Christ accommodating the people rather than *vice versa* (Matt. 9:35). What is needed is intelligibility. It is a simple, obvious point that is frequently overlooked precisely because of its simplicity and obviousness.

Participants should also couch their information in a language style that is familiar to participants; for the sake of identification, understanding and conviction transmission. As J. Paul Rajashekar (1987) argued:

> In this process of mutual interrogation our claims for truth (and the claims of others as well) are put to the test and tempered. This enables us to sharpen our doctrinal claims, spelling them out not only in terms and categories familiar to us, but also in the language and categories intelligible to our dialogue partners. A dialogical theology therefore needs to be "multilingual" rather than "monolingual" in order to make its own claims communicable (p. 15).

One must also be cognisant of the pragmatic need for a common language for coherency purposes. It is important that the faiths put their best feet forward, and event organisers ensure it. If an undesirable state of affairs is allowed to happen, then not only are the specific sessions dysfunctional, the entire dialogue enterprise is put in jeopardy due to "bad press." It is also a gross disservice to the religions involved, especially if publicly disparaged in the media (secular and sacred) because of their poor showing. Regrettably, biased media coverage is an inherent problem worldwide:

> One of the things that those involved in the academic study of religions often have to unravel for students is the negative imaging of both major religious traditions such as Islam and many new religious movements (in this context designated as sects or cults) in the media. More rarely do the media present pictures of people of different religious traditions celebrating, talking, praying, eating or joining together in positive ways (Morgan, 1995, p. 165).

The media can, of course, sabotage the dialogue before it starts, as Aelred J. Pereira (1987) reported:

> *Before the conference [1986 Catholic-Marxist Dialogue in Budapest] there had been warnings in the press about the futility and even impossibility of dialoguing with Marxist scholars who are linked with political power, and about the risks of being led into compromises of the Christian position and of being exploited for political propaganda (p. 265).*

Media skills is therefore another item to add to that ever-growing list of delegate competencies.

Appropriateness: Issues of Dress and Other Nonverbal Behaviours

Each participant officially representing their faith will want to come to the dialogue attired in the sartorial elegance reflective of the occasion and their proud religious heritage. This is one of the most striking features observable at such a gathering; a time and place where orange robed Hindu swamis and Rajneesh can accompany grey and saffron robed Buddhists. Clergy-collared Protestants pass by white-mantled nuns. Black-robed Zen monks and Orthodox priests with their flowing robes, hoods and beards pass by Rastafarians with their dreadlocks, in the company of Hassidics with their side-burns and hats, shaven-headed monks, and blue-suited Mormons with their obligatory short-back-and-sides. White and blue turbaned Sikhs can be seen alongside Jews with skull caps, fez-wearing Muslims, business-suited rabbis, cassock clothed Catholics, Nehru-jacketted Indians and numerous multicoloured saris, gowns, sashes, veils and head scarfs of Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu women.

Likewise, Catholic rosary beads can be seen alongside Mahikari omitama pendants in the company of feathered and leopard-skinned Africans, or Tibetan Buddhists with their prayer wheels, drums and bells. Jews can be seen wearing their parchment filled batim-houses of the tephillin upon their heads and strapped to their arms, and other associated phylacteries. There are also the numerous assortments of crosses to be found. Whether they be small unobtrusive ones worn on the collars of civilian-clothed priests and nuns, or ostentatiously embroidered on the backs of Bishops' robes, or hanging pendulously around Greek Orthodox necks.

All this is made more sensuous when surrounded by chanting and prayers, gongs and silence while the smells of herbs, flowers, candles and incense from Shintoists, neo-pagans, Zoroastrians etc. gently waft over the attendees. Each day can be filled with Jews reading the Law, or Buddhists in meditation near genuflecting, self-crossing Catholics, hand-waving gurus, tai-chi practising Chinese, yoga practising Hindus, and Moslems dutifully kneeling on their prayer mats after completing their various ablution rituals. In short, there is a virtual microcosm of Earth's religious macrocosm.

Such variations in dress sense and behaviour must be respectfully tolerated and no deliberate offence is to be assumed by any delegates. However, some may be tempted to be insulted for good religious reasons. Generally speaking, Fundamentalist Christians like Jehovah's Witnesses consider it an insult to wear anything on one's head while in God's house (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania/ International Bible Students Association, 1988, p. 1052). Whereas, the

Jews honour the reverse behaviour, they need to cover their heads in their temples and synagogues as a sign of religious respect (Ausubel, 1975, p. 191).

It is incumbent upon event organisers to judiciously inform participants of potential sources of insults beforehand, whether via conference handouts, special letters or by private talks. The potential problems and suggested responses will hopefully be put in their rightful perspective before any major incidents occur. It is also the religion's obligation to prepare their delegates in this way.

> *If a Sikh suffers abuse to do with his wearing a turban, or an Australian is the butt of jokes about kangaroos and beer, then it is no good blaming the turban or the kangaroo. The barrier to free and friendly communication is in the mind of the person offering the abuse or making the joke. Once more it may be seen that meanings are in the mind, not in the sign (Dimbleby & Burton, 1985, p. 83).*

This makes the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission's advice about cross-cultural encounter even more appropriate:

> *Be aware that there are many differences in non-verbal behaviour between cultures and try to familiarise yourself with cultural differences in the areas of gesture, facial expression, touching, eye contact, posture, distance and clothing...Learn about offensive non-verbal behaviour in different cultures and avoid them (Community Education Unit, 1988, p. 97).*

However, it is up to each participant to decide if, how, and in what way to accommodate their partners during the dialogue. If it is not a particularly important or sensitive concession, then it should be encouraged as a sign of respect for the Other. If it is an important issue, then the organisers should be chastised for allowing it to become an issue at all, it being indicative of poor planning/Chairmanship, and then they should set about coming to a compromise.

Similar consideration should also be shown to the participants during the dialogue. For example, a Catholic delegate might be fiddling with his rosary beads while listening to the Other, but this does not necessarily indicate boredom, inattention or a snub; rather, it could indicate deep concentration achieved through this traditional meditative technique. If dialogue partners realise this beforehand, then potentially offensive behaviours can turn into sources of pride precisely because the Other did take them seriously. What was previously coded as a "distraction" is now categorised as respectful pre-feedback behaviour.

Indeed, there are many ways that people can show that they are paying attention, for example, by: (a) nodding their heads; (b) looking directly into the delegate's eyes, whether some, most, or all of the time they are speaking; (c) averting the eyes and placing the head in a way that indicates listening; (d) using appropriate sounds in the right places (e.g., 'uh-huh', 'oh?,' tongue-clicking); (e) using words that show one is following the speaker's content (e.g., 'Really?,' 'Did she?'); (f) completing, or echoing, the speaker's sentence; (g) remaining perfectly silent; or (h) rocking one's head from side to side (O'Sullivan, 1994, p. 74). Numerous non-verbal factors can be addressed in this way. However, even these behaviours have to be applied judiciously because of their variant cultural interpretations. For example, direct eye-to-eye contact can be coded as offensive because staring, a common Western practice, may be interpreted as intrusive and impertinent rather than an

indication of a serious willingness to understand the Other. Alternatively, being silent, closed eyed, or looking down or away from a delegate, a typically Eastern practice, may be interpreted as weakness, deception or snubbing rather than humility, or possibly even a courtesy gesture of ritual submission.

Nonverbal behaviours have the potential to confirm and repeat verbal behaviours, of denying and confusing them, of strengthening and emphasising them, or of controlling and regulating what is happening. Yet, surprisingly, only a few authors have suggested that their sacred servants take important notice of facial expressions and body language (Pieterse, 1990, pp. 238-239). There is no doubt that each faith could supply innumerable examples of potentially offensive behaviours which event organisers should be aware of, and then try to prepare an appropriate response strategy.

Conclusion

The decision of who should officially be allowed to participate in formal religious dialogues is not simple, easy or unproblematic. Further research is needed to fully explore these contours. What is clear is that successful religious dialoguing is premised upon both organisers and delegates having a clear and sober understanding of the pragmatic conditions of the dialogic enterprise and its many attendant needs.

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