

The Best War Against Terrorism: Dialogue among the Religions

Leonard Swidler

Dialogue as the term is used today to characterize encounters between persons and groups with different religions or ideologies is something quite new under the sun. In the past when different religions or ideologies met it was mainly to overcome, or at least to teach, the other, because each was completely convinced that it alone held the secret of the meaning of human life.

More and more in recent times sincerely convinced persons of different religions and ideologies have slowly come to the conviction that they did not hold the secret of the meaning of human life entirely unto themselves, that in fact they had something very important to learn from each other. As a consequence they approached their encounters with other religions and ideologies not primarily in the teaching mode, holding the secret of life alone, but *primarily* in the learning mode, seeking to find more of the secret of the meaning of life. That is dialogue.

In the wake of September 11, 2001, not only Americans but many around the world, and especially religious people, have suddenly been thrust into an awareness of the absolute necessity to learn about Islam and to enter into dialogue with Muslims. It is on this existential issue

Leonard Swidler is a Professor of Catholic Thought & Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University

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within the context of the current War on Terror that I wish to reflect together with you. First, let me offer some thoughts on what several current terms mean.

I. What the Current Terror Is and Is Not

1. Definition of Terror

Terror is violence, usually deadly, deliberately perpetrated *specifically against innocent persons* so as to strike terror into the host group. There have been and are today several terrorist groups around the world, e.g., in the recent past, the Ku Klux Klan, the Red Army, the Weathermen, and others, and today groups on both sides of the Northern Ireland conflict, Aum Shin Riki, the Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Laskar Jihad, al Qaeda, and others.

2. Connection of Terror with Islam

As some of the names above indicate, there are several contemporary terrorist organizations which allege a connection with Islam. Let it be said, however, that the sources of Islam, and the vast majority of the Islamic tradition, and living Muslims find terrorism abhorrent. They see terror done in the name of Islam as a perversion of Islam (whose very name Islam has peace, salam as its basis).

3. Fundamentalism

A word about *Fundamentalism*. Historically it is a term coined at the beginning of the twentieth century by a group of conservative U.S. Protestants who wanted to stress what they called the Fundamentals of Christianity. Their ideals included 1) a so-called literalist understanding of their Holy Scriptures, 2) an alleged un-changing understanding of the truth, and consequently 3) a restrictive policy on the public behavior of women (referring, e.g. in the New Testament

to such statements as: women should keep silence in the church, wives, be subject to your husbands).

Later the term Fundamentalism found rather wide application to persons and groups other than conservative Protestants where a similar *mentality* is present: That is, a mentality that tends to be characterized by 1) a literalist approach to some basic text, 2) an absolutist attitude toward the truth - which they hold exclusively, and whoever differs is in falsehood and must expect the consequences, and 3) a restrictive policy toward certain groups, especially women. Such a Fundamentalist mentality can be found today in Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Marxist, Muslim, and other religious and ideological groups.

4. Islamism

In the 1970s a number of Fundamentalist Islamic groups began to develop a political ideology and strategy, which they claimed was based on Islam, and began to call themselves *Islamists* (not to be confused with Islamicist, which means a person who is an expert in the study of Islam). Islamist, as a consequence, has tended recently to be used to refer to these groups rather than Fundamentalist, though it still makes sense to use Fundamentalist when referring mainly to their mentality, and especially when linking Muslim Fundamentalists with other Fundamentalists.

Islamism, however, must not be thought of as just another political movement intending to make its special contribution to the welfare of the world. It is a neo-fascist - that is, anti-freedom, anti-tolerance - political movement that aims to eliminate all other political forms in the world! This may seem fantastic, but carried to its extreme by someone like Osama bin Laden, Islamism has the same aims that Hitler and Stalin had: to control the entire world! Bin Laden is convinced that through him God destroyed one Super Power, the Soviet Union, in the Soviet-Afghan War. Now, God, having destroyed the World Trade Center (On October 9 bin Laden blasphemously stated to the world that God destroyed those buildings!), was going to destroy

the last Super Power, the Infidel United States, through him, Osama bin Laden,

5. Jihadism

Jihad is an Arabic word meaning struggle. From almost the beginning of Islam in the seventh century, Jihad has meant both the internal struggle against ungodliness within oneself, and the external struggle against the oppression of true religions. The Islamists have stressed almost exclusively the external notion, equating Jihad with a so-called Holy War of Islam against non-Islam. A number of Islamists have pushed the War aspect so strongly that they call themselves Jihadists, meaning, those who follow a program of attaining their goal of political power by means of violence, Jihad. Some Jihadists draw the logical conclusion, like Osama bin Laden and his many henchmen, and move on to terror.

II. Why Do Terrorists attack the U.S. and Other Democratic Peoples?

Terrorists attack the U.S., and others, because they hate *Modernity* and its values: That is, Freedom/Responsibility, Personalism, Human Rights (*especially for women* and minorities), Democracy, Dialogue, and aim to supplant it with their absolutist vision of the truth and how everyone in the world should live.

As noted, the terrorists are simply the extreme wing of the Islamists, Jihadists, who use terror as their preferred form of violence - as well as extreme Fundamentalists of other religions and ideologies. That is, they hold medieval absolutist, exclusivist views, insisting that they have the absolute, exclusive grasp of the Truth - and woe to those who disagree!

III. Israel-Palestine Peace: A Challenge for Us All but Not the *Cause* of Terrorism

The hostility between Israel and the Palestinians has been a running sore on the globe's body politic for decades. It has not only caused millions untold pain and destruction, but also threatens to become the trigger of a larger world conflagration. Hence, attaining a just and lasting peace in the Middle East is a challenge that desperately needs to be met both for those living there and for world peace.

Can one then claim that the present Islamist/Jihadist-led terrorism is *caused* by the lack of a Middle East peace? The answer is, I believe, a clear no!

Osama bin Laden and his fellow terrorists were not focused on a just Mideast peace. Remember, the attack on New York and Washington was in the works for over a year before September, 2001 - but a year before that attack Israel and Palestine were engaged in the most intense peace negotiations to date, along with great urging and support on the part of the US. If attaining a peace acceptable to Palestinians had been the goal of the terrorists, they would not have started plotting that horror just then! Rather, they wanted to prevent a Middle East peace, and therefore started planning the 9/11 terror.

IV. The World's Poverty: A Challenge for Us All But Not the *Cause* of Terrorism

Some say that we should look to eliminate the feeding grounds of terrorism, poverty and its related results. Yes, indeed, we should pursue this goal of social justice ever more intensely.

But poverty is not the *cause* of the growth of terrorism. The percentage of poor people in past history has been vastly greater than it is today. This fact is obscured by the talk about the growing gap between the rich and the poor. Those classified as poor in America (and many other countries) today, for example, have vastly more material wherewithal than the poor in America 100 years ago.

Regarding the gap between the rich and the poor, it needs to be recalled that huge numbers of Americans, and others, are no longer poor not *despite*, e.g., Bill Gates's becoming the richest person in the world, but because he has!

Is the lifting of the floor of the world's poorest people that has already been accomplished sufficient? Of course, not! All of us need to work to raise the floor ever higher.

However, today's chief terrorist, Osama bin Laden, did not grow up in poverty, but in luxury, having inherited perhaps \$300 million! Osama was for years a spoiled playboy, but then he suddenly got religion, meaning really he got the opposite of religion, idolatry; that is, he took on the externals and made them into ends. For whatever psychological reasons operated in his case (and there many similar ones in all cultures), he rejected Modernity, with its valuing of Freedom, Democracy, and Dialogue, opting instead for the medieval mindset of absolutism and exclusivism: I have the truth, and whoever disagrees....takes the consequences.

Only a subterranean change of consciousness of this magnitude could explain his rage in 1991 at the reported externality that infidel U.S. soldiers came to defend Arabian soil, thereby soiling the sacred soil of Mohammad. He then turned himself, and his hundreds of millions, to terror against the external symbol of Modernity, America.

Again, then, I would ask: Is poverty, the *cause* of terrorism? Clearly not. Otherwise the world would have been even more overwhelmed by terrorism in the past when there was vastly more poverty. Also again, *we must do all we can to reduce and eliminate poverty*. However, we should not be misled into thinking that attaining that yearned for goal will *ipso facto* eliminate terrorism, though what it can do is to shrink the pool of potential recruits for terrorism.

V. What Should Be Done about the Terrorists?

What, then should we do about the terrorists?

First, we can *always* find fault with *any* position or person.

However, cynicism is as humanly destructive as is its opposite, naivete. We should use our critical-thinking capacities at all times, being ever vigilant to see that in the pursuit of the criminal terrorists we do not give them the ultimate victory by eroding the foundations of freedom and human dignity for all.

At the same time, however, we should also be aware that being naive *vis a vis* terrorists can be as destructive as Chamberlain's pacifism *vis a vis* Hitler was. His weakness in the face of Hitler's assault on Czechoslovakia simply encouraged Hitler to attack Poland and launch World War II.

Jingoism? No! But forming a global alliance that will use all tools - diplomatic, political, economic, educational, investigative, and where appropriate, force - to pursue and root out the terrorist criminals and their supporters? Yes!

We must win over to opposition to terrorist crime those political leaders who can be won over. Those who continue to support terrorist crime must be shamed by the world, isolated, and if their support for terrorism is vicious enough, they should be subjected to force as any violent criminal would be.

VI. What Do We Ordinary Citizens Do about Terrorism?

Most of us cannot lead this multi-pronged police action. Rather, we ordinary citizens must encourage, and direct, the police. But beyond this vital, negative function, we must expend a huge amount of energy in positive efforts.

1. Non-Muslims Need to Advocate and Practice Tolerance and Respect

Those of us who are not Muslim must denounce any and all harassing or denigration of our fellow citizens who are Muslim, or Arab - indeed we must courageously and even preemptively condemn any and all denigration of Muslims or Arabs as such, any and everywhere

in the world. Not only toleration, but full respect of all, and now, especially of Muslims and Arabs, must be vigorously advocated and acted on by all non-Muslims and non-Arabs.

2. Muslims Need to Speak out

Beyond that, those of us who are Muslim need to speak out, courageously condemning the hi-jacking not only of airliners but also the hijacking of Islam, perverting the salam of Islam into a murder of innocents, and blaspheming God, the merciful and compassionate One, twisting him into a murderer. This strong and continual condemnation of Terror, of Jihadism, of Islamism will be not just a minor, but a major, and challenging, contribution that our Muslim sisters and brothers can make to Islam and humanity today.

3. Support Moderate and Progressive Islam

Beyond both Muslims' condemning Islamism, Jihadism, and Terror and non-Muslims promoting and practicing tolerance and respect, all of us together should protect, support, and encourage the voices of moderate and progressive Islam. It has often been repeated that the majority of Muslims abhor Islamism, Jihadism, and Terror. This majority of Muslims must not be a silent majority, but must provide a strong echo for those Muslim thinkers who risk speaking out - some even risking their lives! - giving them the strength and courage to continue on that truly dangerous path today.

Non-Muslims likewise need to protect, support, and encourage moderate and progressive Muslim thinkers. Learn who they are, invite them to speak, strive to give them jobs and positions where they can speak and provide leadership instead of being black-balled by Islamist forces, which have a great deal of money power. Combat their money power with money power by supporting the moderate and progressive Muslim thinkers!

4. Education for *Deep-Dialogue* and *Critical-Thinking*

But our ordinary citizens special responsibility is to work in the field of education in the broadest sense, the kind that must go on from the cradle to the grave; it includes the school but encompasses all life. At the heart of this education is the fostering of a mentality of Critical-Thinking and Deep-Dialogue - of the personally transformative kind whereby we come to understand and respect ourselves, and reach out to understand and respect the Other.

Many of us are trying to do this, but we all need to find creative ways to expand our efforts.¹ This educational effort, especially by our living example, can be our major contribution to a future world where terrorism will be something only studied in textbooks on the pathologies of the past.

VII. Dialogue among the Religions

Let us look carefully at dialogue among religions means today. As I indicated at the beginning, dialogue is a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that s/he can change and grow. This very definition of dialogue embodies the first guideline, or, as I call it, the first commandment, of dialogue.

In the religious-ideological 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 her or him, 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,

¹ For details on what has been and is being done and how you can learn more about and become involved in Deep-Dialogue and Critical-Thinking, see the web site of the Global Dialogue Institute: <http://global-dialogue.com>

because we were convinced that we alone had the absolute truth.

But dialogue is *not* debate. In dialogue each partner must listen to the other as openly and sympathetically as s/he can in an attempt to understand the others position as precisely and, as it were, as much from within, as possible. Such an attitude automatically includes the assumption that at any point we might find the partner's position so persuasive that, if we would act with integrity, we would have to change, and change can be disturbing.

We are here, of course, speaking of a specific kind of dialogue, an interreligious dialogue. It is obvious that interreligious dialogue is something new under the sun. We could not conceive of it, let alone do it in the past. How, then, can we effectively engage in this new thing? Over the decades I have distilled ten practical guidelines of dialogue that need to be followed if in fact there is to be a dialogue. I call them the *Dialogue Decalogue*² The following are some basic ground rules, or "commandments," of interreligious dialogue. These are not theoretical rules, or commandments given from "on high," as the Bible says were given by God to Moses, but ones that have been learned from hard experience. All ten commandments are available in both English and Korean, so let me lift out just a few key examples. I would like to start with the first commandment.

First Commandment: *The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly. We enter into dialogue so that we can learn, change, and grow, not so we can force change on the other, as one hopes to do in debate. On the other hand, because in dialogue each partner comes with the intention of learning and changing herself, one's partner in fact will also change. Thus the goal of debate, and much more, is accomplished far more effectively by dialogue.*

Fourth Commandment: *In interreligious dialogue we must not compare*

² "Dehwa shipkyemyung: Dhongkyoganu dewharul wihan gibonshogin kyuchik" (Korean), in *Bulgyo Shirmun* (Iri, Korea), Aug. 22, 1984.

our ideals with our partners practice, but rather our ideals with our partner=s ideals, our practice with our partner's practice. For example, we should not compare the older Hindu *practice* of *Suttee*, whereby the widow is thrown onto the funeral pyre with her husbands body, with the Christian *ideal* of love of neighbor. Rather, the Hindu *practice* should be compared with the Christian *practice* of the burning of witches and heretics.

Sixth Commandment: *Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are.* Rather, each partner should not only listen to the other partner with openness and sympathy but also attempt to agree with the dialogue partner as far as is possible while still maintaining integrity with his own tradition; where he absolutely can agree no further without violating his own integrity, precisely there is the real point of disagreement - which most often turns out to be different from the point of disagreement that was falsely assumed ahead of time.

Ninth Commandment: *Persons entering into interreligious dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological traditions.* A lack of such self-criticism implies that one=s own tradition already has all the correct answers. Such an attitude makes dialogue not only unnecessary, but even impossible, since we enter into dialogue primarily so *we* can learn - which obviously is impossible if our tradition has never made a misstep, if it has all the right answers. To be sure, in interreligious dialogue one must stand within a religious tradition with integrity and conviction, but such integrity and conviction must include, not exclude, a healthy self-criticism. Without it there can be no dialogue - and, indeed, no integrity.

Interreligious dialogue operates in three areas: the practical, where we collaborate to help humanity; the depth or spiritual dimension where we attempt to experience the partners religion or ideology from

within ; the cognitive, where we seek understanding and truth. Interreligious dialogue also has three phases. In the first phase we unlearn misinformation about each other and begin to know each other as we truly are.

In phase two we begin to discern values in the partner=s tradition and wish to appropriate them into our own tradition. For example, in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue Christians might learn a greater appreciation of the meditative tradition, and Buddhists might learn a greater appreciation of the prophetic, social justice tradition both values traditionally strongly, though not exclusively, associated with the other's community.

If we are serious, persistent, and sensitive enough in the dialogue, we may at times enter into phase three. Here we together begin to explore new areas of reality, of meaning, and of truth, of which neither of us had even been aware before. We are brought face to face with this new, as-yet-unknown-to-us dimension of reality only because of questions, insights, probings produced in the dialogue. We may thus dare to say that patiently pursued dialogue can become an instrument of new re-velation, a further un-veiling of reality - on which we must then act.

There is something radically different about phase one on the one hand and phases two and three on the other. In the latter we do not simply add on quantitatively another truth or value from the partners tradition. Instead, as we assimilate it within our own religious self-understanding, it will proportionately transform our self-understanding. Since our dialogue partner will be in a similar position, we will then be able to witness authentically to those elements of deep value in our own tradition that our partners tradition may well be able to assimilate with self-transforming profit. All this of course will have to be done with complete integrity on each side, each partner remaining authentically true to the vital core of his/her own religious tradition.

However, in significant ways that vital core will be perceived and experienced differently under the influence of the dialogue, but, if the

dialogue is carried on with both integrity and openness, the result will be that, for example, the Jew will be authentically Jewish and the Christian will be authentically Christian, not despite the fact that Judaism and/or Christianity have been profoundly Buddhized, but because of it. And the same is true of a Judaized and/or Christianized Buddhism. There can be no talk of a syncretism here, for syncretism means amalgamating various elements of different religions into some kind of a (con)fused whole without concern for the integrity of the religions involved - which is not the case with authentic dialogue.

VIII. Conclusion: Dialogue and Terror

Obviously the interreligious dialogue I have been describing is not a quick fix, but rather a long-term project. We cannot advocate dialogue as an immediate therapy for an already radically diseased situation. Rather, dialogue should be seen as the long-term *preventative*. Indeed, we need to foster dialogue even outside of the religious area. We need to foster a *mentality* of Deep-Dialogue, and its necessary concomitant, Critical-Thinking. Though we may at times need short-term tactical battles against terrorism, the most effective long-term war on Terror is the fostering of Dialogue.