

A New Decalogue

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In this last lecture, we now look at what we have learnt as a result of examining the Indian experience. In the first, we identified three assumptions underpinning the dialogue industry in the west. These are: (1), the Enlightenment construct of the atomistic individual; (2), the epistemological skepticism of the Enlightenment that underpins the very popular 'pluralist' theology of other religions; and (3), the propensity to neglect the political and social dimensions of dialogue.

As we traveled to India, so we found a contrasting account and approach to dialogue. In general there is a much stronger willingness to be committed to a tradition and simultaneously entertaining – both theologically and experientially – other traditions. So in this concluding lecture, I shall revisit the Dialogue Decalogue of Swidler and suggest an entirely different set of commandments, which are grounded in the Indian experience.

In one sense, this exercise, namely, to revisit the dialogue Decalogue, is not in the spirit of the Indian experience. The dialogue Decalogue is inspired by the ten commandments of the Pentateuch, which then carries connotations of 'universal' and 'timeless'. However, we now know that any set of commandments cannot be 'true' for all people; we need to recognize – what Alasdair MacIntyre calls – the 'tradition-constituted' nature of enquiry. Although it is true that there are some universal laws (for example, one should not resort to violence in the dialogue), these are bound to be at a high level of generality and therefore almost banal. (It is interesting to note how Swidler does not include such injunctions, even though I am sure he would be supportive of them.) Once, however, we move beyond such generalities, the task of identifying rules depends on the tradition one is in. The purpose of the rules is to explain how one interprets and engages with the other from the vantage point of one's tradition. Naturally some rules might be true for more than one tradition. And I shall note where a rule is 'Christian' specific and where it can extend to other traditions.

One further preliminary is necessary: to limit the number of commandments to ten is a good discipline, although I have permitted myself an eleventh commandment because it is where we deal with the life beyond the dialogue. However, these eleven commandments should not be taken to be totally comprehensive or definitive. As already noted, there is a level of 'generalities', which is being assumed; basic obligations around hospitality and civility are taken for granted (for example, serving halal for Muslims).

The context out of which these commandments arise is a Christian one. The commandments are compatible with the mainstream Christian traditions (perhaps more Catholic than Protestant).

1. We should be committed to a tradition, preferably to an orthodox form of it. We need maturity and a strong sense of belonging.

Both Bede Griffiths and Raimundo Panikka insisted on this as a primary condition for participation in dialogue. Panikka talks about a 'profound loyalty towards one's own religious tradition.'¹ This is a universal rule. We are talking about interfaith dialogue; we are talking about an encounter between people who live in one tradition and want to engage with people in another. An interfaith dialogue assumes a commitment to a faith. In addition, to make this encounter meaningful, one must know and understand one's own tradition. Those who know, understand, and love their own tradition find it easy to recognize in others the same depth of commitment and affection. This is true every area of life. Two

music enthusiasts (say one involved in jazz the other choral) can relate much more effectively to each other, than with the musical amateur who cannot read music. When you love one tradition, one has the capacity to grow to love another; when one is semi-detached or critical, love is much harder to develop.

2. We should build on the tradition of engagement which is found in our past.

The second rule is not universal; instead it is grounded in Christianity. Contrary to popular perception, interfaith dialogue is not a new activity. Although it is true that Christians wanted to share Christ with everyone, this never excluded the possibility of assimilating, learning, and being shaped by other religious traditions. The Christian tradition is already a multi-faceted conversation. We were birthed in Judaism; we were shaped by Hellenistic thought; we learned of Aristotle from Muslims; and we continue to converse with the discoveries of the Enlightenment. To continue to be shaped by other traditions is an obligation we inherit from our past. One irony of our moment is that those Christians most committed to dialogue are often those least comfortable with the tradition; and those who insist we need to keep a Christianity pure and undefiled assume that they are being true to the tradition. The truth is the opposite. The theological process in our past is a dialogical one; we learned of God through conversation. Those who are being most faithful to the tradition are those who commit to dialogue. Those who are betraying the tradition are those who are hostile to dialogue.

3. We should pray together before discussing whether prayer is possible.

There is much less interest in India with dialogue confined to talking with each other. We have already seen how we are exhorted to encounter the other in our hearts. Bede Griffiths calls us ‘to live this Hindu experience of God’.² An encounter at this level obligates us to start sharing each other’s worship space. The conventional view is that dialogue is easiest about ‘ethics’ (working together in the world), then ‘beliefs’, and ‘prayer’ is hardest of all. Some Christians worry that a ‘spiritual’ openness to other faith traditions may create an opening for the ‘forces of darkness’ to enter in. Others, rather more sophisticated, worry that the disconnecting of one practice from the framework, makes the practice unintelligible.

We need to learn to trust God rather more. Even in the same tradition, we all come to worship with our different models of God, our different understandings of Jesus, and our different interpretations of the creed, but we trust that – in and through the grace of God – our prayer is received. If I manage to sit alongside a fundamentalist Christian and trust that God is receiving our worship, then there should be no problem about sitting alongside a Muslim or a Jew. The diversity is no greater. If worship with different Christians is not a problem, then interfaith worship should not be a problem either. I concede that there are problems of vocabulary and liturgy (for example, do you pray, expressly, in the name of Jesus); however, once we recognize the different interpretations found within the Christian tradition, this problem should be relieved.

Conversations about whether we should pray together are not the place to start. Enjoying a focused silence together is a much better starting point. Let God do some of the work. Words can come later.³

4. We should seek the truth.

Western assumptions underpinning dialogue tend to be a post-Kantian, non-realist view of truth; Indian assumptions tend to be much more realist with strongly inclusivist tendencies. The latter, I shall now show, is much more appropriate.

The dialogue industry in the west makes much of such slogans as ‘truth is inaccessible’ and ‘it is all a mystery’ and ‘the problem with adherents in exclusivist religion is that they assume they have the

absolute truth'. Clarifying precisely what is meant by such slogans is often difficult. John Hick, however, is probably right when he suggests the best way to make sense of such sentiments is in a Kantian framework. All metaphysics is part of the noumenal world, which is inaccessible; human knowledge is confined to the ways in which the world is interpreted by mind. On this model, we arrive at the following very popular picture: the Real (i.e. the objective reality, which we cannot call God because that would offend Buddhists) is sending out some sort of objective experience, which is then interpreted differently in different cultures; so Muslims call it Allah, Christians may call it Christ, and some Hindus may call it Krishna. What it is actually like we do not know; instead all we know is that something is there, which is named differently in different cultures. For Hick and his western dialogical disciples, the beauty of this model is that enforces humility and, hopefully, a constructive attitude to others.

Panikka dismisses this notion in passing: 'I do not defend the naïve and uncritical notion that "there is" one "thing" which Men call by many names – as if the naming of the Mystery were simply a matter of attaching such tags as culture or language puts at our disposal.'⁴ He goes on to contrast this account with the model of the divine found in Hinduism. He explains, 'This is, incidentally, not the meaning of ... *ṛgvedic* verse, "(God is) One (though) the sages call it by many names." Contrariwise, it is suggesting that each authentic name enriches and qualifies that Mystery which is neither purely transcendent nor purely immanent.'⁵

For Panikka, there is a complete difference between the western post-Kantian agnosticism, and the Hindu awareness of the complexity of God which requires many descriptors and qualifiers. In India, it is complexity that induces the humility, not the agnosticism. There are three reasons why this position is a much more appropriate basis for dialogue. First, it means that there are clear reasons why certain descriptions of God/the Mystery can be rejected. If a culture (an Aryan one perhaps) wanted to describe God as the supporter of white, Germanic supremacy and perhaps blacks and Jews as consequences of sin and the demonic, then on the western epistemology this is just another culture naming God in its own way. Working however with a realist epistemology that stresses complexity, there are some descriptions of God we can and should reject on the grounds that the *description is not true and adds nothing to our understanding of the ultimate reality*. This raises the obvious question: on what criteria do we reject this Aryan description of God? And the answer must be – as we shall see in rule six – it is incompatible with the revelation of God in Christ. Second, it means that the dialogue is not simply an act of cultural sharing, instead it involves theological and spiritual discovery. Given the complex nature of God, we value the new perspective and seize its potential for learning new things about God. Third, Indian realist inclusivism works with a set of assumptions that virtually every other religion in the world would recognize. The western dialogue industry has not appreciated the 'imperialist' nature of its assumptions. And as Panikka alludes the propensity to claim the 'inclusivism' of Hinduism as an ally for a post-Kantian epistemological non-realism is a manifest injustice. Adherents of other faith traditions care about theology, in a way that non-realists don't.

5. We must recognize any political, economic, or gender issues in the dialogue.

Tinu Ruparell (a Christian-Hindu with an Indian background now working in Canada) has made this a theme of his work. From the presumption that one should sit in chairs (when many would prefer to sit on the floor) to the ubiquitous use of English as the language of dialogue, the dialogue industry often flirts with the colonial approach. Ruparell links his concerns with the critique of Kenneth Surin. John Hick's pluralism, argues Surin, is analogous to the Macdonald's hamburger. In the same way that Macdonalds is now a global food – a product of global capitalism – and available with virtually no variation in every city in the world, so Hick's pluralism is an American product, treating religion as the 'same' in every city of the world. Ruparell summarizes thus: 'Our colonialist guilt brings with it a form of dialogue built on false, ideological egalitarianism which homogenizes people and ironically further supports the inequalities and injustices wrought by the history of colonialism in the first place.'⁶ Ruparell's solution to this is an interstitial theology, where individuals increasingly inhabit two traditions. In this respect he

is a direct successor to Panikkar and Griffiths. Ruparell explains: 'Through the use of interstitial theology one can consciously and carefully seek to hybridize one's own religious commitments, practices, and beliefs with those of the reluctant other. In so doing one creates a novel religious location liminal to oneself and the other as well as redescribing the other's and one's own positions in order to contribute new options in the service of religious conversation.'⁷ From the political, Ruparell arrives at an account of dialogue which is powerful, embodiment of the different theologies and practices in one's very own life. Admittedly, he seems to flirt with a 'non-realist' route to this model of dialogue, but this is not actually necessary for his argument. It could be that the reality of God seeks to impress on us the need to live in a variety of traditions.

The need to confront the political, social, cultural, and gender issues in the dialogue is an imperative forced on us by our understanding of what is disclosed in a variety of faith traditions. The dialogue needs to operate in a justice framework.

6. We should expect to encounter Christ.

This is perhaps the most controversial rule. So a sustained discussion is needed to clarify precisely what is meant. Karl Rahner's commitment to the truth of the Trinity arrives at the controversial idea that behind the authentic experience of other faith communities is Christ. This to many seems very contentious and offensive. Yet once one understands precisely what is meant by the idea, it is the only logical way of looking at the discourse.

It is Christ that reveals Godself in the experience of humanity. Panikka is right; Christ is bigger than Jesus. For the role of the second person of the Trinity is the disclosure and revelation of God. It is called Christ because any experience of God must, at a minimum, be compatible with the nature of God revealed in Jesus. So, for example, if the experience of God results in hatred or racism, this is incompatible with the disclosure of the nature of God in Jesus. Therefore we can be confident that God is not the source of the experience. It is more likely to be ego or some sort of cultural preoccupation or unworked out frustration. However, if the experience results in an elevated sense of justice and the obligation to work for peace, this would be compatible with the disclosure of God in Jesus, which gives us the confidence that it is an authentic disclosure of God.

So the phrase 'Christ is being experienced in other religions' should not be misunderstood. It simply means it is God. And how do we know it is God? We know it is God because the report of the experience is not incompatible with what we know about God revealed in the life of Jesus. In short, the word 'Christ' means the mode of God active in the experience of the other faith communities and the criteria that makes such a claim possible.

So Panikka is right to exhort us to learn of Christ; however, Aleaz is right to suggest that the 'Christic principle' can also be shaped by the encounter with other faith traditions. The criteria for a legitimate experience of God, which we find in Jesus, are a minimum. So the minimum might make 'love' central. However, the Buddhist insight that one should have a 'universal compassion' for animals and the environment should, perhaps, be seen as a transforming supplement to the obligation to love. The Christic principle – to use Aleaz's phrase – should then become modified.

If we decide to refuse to talk about Christ, for fear, perhaps, of being imperialist or conceited, then the consequences will be dire. It means we have no criterion for distinguishing truth and falsity in religion. All faithfulness depends on revelation: we need to trust some place where God tells us what God seeks, desires, and wants. For Christians, it is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For Hindus, it may be the Upanishads. Naturally the need to understand how each other's 'revelations' work is an important part of the dialogue.

7. We should strive to understand the other, so we are tempted to convert.

Conversion and dialogue are words that are seen as incompatible. Christians, whose primary aim is to bring about a change in affiliation (from say Hindu to Christian), are rightly seen as a problem. But conversion has a broader and less controversial meaning, which must be part of the dialogue.

Most of us want to ‘convert’ the other in some respect. I have views on politics, economics, ethics, and sport. I think my views are right – or at least closer to the truth than many alternatives. And of course I want more people to share them. I have views on dialogue, which I am propagating in lectures and in books. I wouldn’t do this, unless I hoped that someone listening or reading might start to see things differently. Even people who don’t believe in the correspondence theory of truth spend considerable time trying to persuade ‘critical realists’ (like myself) that they are mistaken. The fact is we are all in the conversion business.

This is also true of the western model of dialogue. Any ‘exclusivist’ from any tradition was obliged to ‘convert’ to a form of liberalism before coming to the table. And certainly the liberal political and social agenda was a key goal of much dialogue: many dialogues, ostensibly, hoped that the result would be a world less patriarchy and more committed to programs for justice. Although no one was required to change affiliation, conversion to a different form of Hinduism or Christianity or whatever was required.

A confident faith, which really does trust the world to God’s care, will not be obsessed with changing affiliations. Christians readily acknowledge many millions of non-Christians (e.g. virtually every Jew in the Hebrew Bible) as part of God’s providential plan. To make changing affiliation the priority is deeply misguided and a denial of our own understanding of God.

A healthy dialogue, however, does not exclude the possibility of ‘converting’. Indeed a goal of the dialogue is that everyone ‘converts’ to each other’s tradition. If we understand ‘convert’ in the sense of ‘understand from within’, then everyone should convert. We want as Christians – to use Bede Griffith’s phrase – to know the Hindu experience of God. I want this knowledge because I am being a good Christian; I know sufficient saints in Hinduism to see that the ‘fruits of the Spirit’ are readily visible. Seeking knowledge of the transforming power of the Hindu experience of God is seeking knowledge of the one God disclosed in Christ.

Sometimes individuals will convert and change affiliation. This is both inevitable and not wrong. I am a member of the Episcopal Church in the United States; it is relatively small; and I would love it to be bigger. I would be delighted if more Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Catholics joined the Episcopal Church; it is, in my view, a remarkably healthy form of Christianity. It needs some members to keep it viable. However, witnessing to the priorities of love and friendship with other Christians means that this desire is rarely visible. Given the distance between a Hindu and an Episcopalian is much larger than the distance between a Catholic and an Episcopalian, I do not expect Hinduism to provide the numerical growth in the Episcopal Church USA. However, in India, the situation is different. It is important that this is recognized. Ultimately, when it comes to the numbers involved in different forms of Christianity, Christians are called to trust God.

In the dialogue we are called to enter in with humility and learn of God from others. That process will require the mutual entertaining of the other to the point that one understands entirely the attractiveness of the other tradition. It sets an important benchmark. You know when you have met the appropriate standard of ‘faithfulness to the Spirit’, when you can see the Spirit in the other. Dialogue so entertained will make overt recruitment impossible: if one still wants to other to change institutional affiliation, then one has not really understood the beauty, coherence, and power of the other.

8. We should be willing to raise difficult questions and confront difficulties.

A curse of much western dialogue is the complete evasion of difficulties. The 'problem areas' are often the barrier to true understanding. As the dialogue progresses, it is important that the difficult questions are invited. It is always interesting to learn how a 'holy' person in another tradition reflects on the difficult questions posed by his or her tradition. Questions about the text, history, doctrine, or practices should be raised. Courtesy requires that the issue is raised as a question rather than a statement. Thoughtful Hindus do have a distinctive interpretation of caste; and Muslims are proud of the Prophet Muhammad's treatment of women. We converse about these questions as a necessary precondition to understanding the message of God within a different tradition.

9. We need to accommodate what is true, resist that which is evil, and tolerate that which is tolerable.

Karl Rahner had a very discriminating view of all religions (including Christianity). Rahner writes, 'a non-Christian religion does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements, moreover, mixed up with human depravity which is the result of the original sin and later aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to man as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ.'⁸ Because the God Rahner worshipped was responsible for the entire world, he was sure that the Spirit of God was to be found in all religious traditions. However, because human ego, institutional sinfulness, and agents of wickedness are also at work in the world, he was equally sure that much that was wicked and misguided was also to be found in all religious tradition.

The dialogue should recognize that we need to be discriminating. It is better to be discriminating rather than insist that only the holy and the good are part of the religion and all other disturbing aspects are outside the religion. So for example, Christians are inclined to suggest that Martin Luther King and Mother Theresa of Calcutta are part of Christianity, while the Inquisition or the Crusades are not. The truth is that all faith traditions can be used to serve the purposes of egoism and sin. The Inquisition is part of Christianity; it is also, we now see, a deeply misguided part of Christianity.

We search for the experience of God that underpins the holiness in another's tradition. We reject that which is clearly deeply destructive to human wellbeing and utterly incompatible with the disclosure of love in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. However, there is much that is in between. The concept of toleration does have a role to play here. Toleration involves the willingness to accept differences (whether religious, moral, ethnic, or economic) of which, at whatever level, one might disapprove. Tolerance can be seen as a half-way house between hostility and hatred on the one hand, and love and acceptance on the other. Hostility and hatred will result in an intolerant attitude and intolerant actions; love and acceptance will not need tolerance at all.⁹ The dialogue will introduce us to (a) unfamiliar ideas or practices, or (b) incompatible ideas or practices, which may well require a period of toleration. Homosexuality, for example, might be a lifestyle option that some traditions can endorse and others will have to tolerate.

10. When the dialogue extends outside the immediate conversation partners, others should be included.

The particular dialogue also operates in a wider context. At certain points in the dialogue it is necessary to acknowledge that wider context. So, for example, a Hindu-Christian dialogue in India might well start reflecting on the nature of Islam. This rule requires us to invite a Muslim to the conversation.

The goal here is to keep the dialogue honest. So it is good that Christians learn about Hinduism by conversing with Hindus. There are plenty of Christian experts on Hinduism, who are on the lecture circuit explaining to Christian congregations the misguided worldview of Hinduism. And in so doing, these Christian congregations learn nothing about the grace in Hinduism, caricatures are not challenged,

and distortions are not corrected. However, a dialogical approach assumes, as a basic act of moral integrity, that it is vitally important to learn about Hinduism from Hindus.

The academy has learnt this basic lesson the hard way. We now know how certain Orientalists distorted the traditions of the East. The outsider has an obligation to become informed before contributing to the conversation. And the act of becoming informed involves listening to those who know best, namely, those who belong.

So there are two reasons why the principle of learning about the other from the other is so foundational. The first is that one learns directly from the source, not second hand. The information is therefore likely to be more reliable. But second, one ensures that a basic rule of civility is observed, namely, the imperative of never expressing a view about another tradition that one would not be willing to express in front of the adherents of another tradition. For white people to discuss 'racism' without black people present allows ignorance and prejudice to be aired; the inclusion of black people guarantees (or at least makes more likely) understanding and sound analysis.

We embark on the dialogue because we believe in the sound principle that knowledge of the other involves conversation with the other. However, sometimes dialogues can end up forgetting this principle. So homosexuality is discussed without a gay person present; or Israel discussed without a Jew or a Muslim being there. The principle that provokes us to dialogue should not be forgotten. When the topics for conversation are extending beyond those present; others should be invited.

Now this concludes the Ten Commandments for dialogue, as constructed in the light of the growing literature emerging from India. However, it would be incomplete, if we did not add one further injunction. This was the discovery made by Ashutosh Varshney.

The Final Injunction: We should strive to create on-going institutional structures that ensure continuing acquaintance and understanding

A commitment to dialogue is not simply to the immediate conversation. If the commitment stops at the level of immediate conversation, then it is doomed to be ephemeral. The commitment needs to continue. It should generate friendships between people; it should lead to a growth of hospitality; and ideally, it should express itself in further opportunities for growth and understanding.

Perhaps no where is the individualistic assumption of western dialogue more explicit than the ease with which the individuals gather and then separate. They fly in and then leave. The work is done. Other cultures are very much more aware of the need, as part of the conversation, to build the relationship, establish the trust, and share each other's lives. The dialogue is simply part of something bigger.

Creating institutional structures should be an important part of the dialogical process. Connecting for a moment is insufficient. Ideally the dialogue needs to be part of larger structure and institution. Institutions that emerge from the dialogue and maintain the dialogue can serve a wider purpose. When the pressures arise, an existing organization can be much more influential than groups of individuals trying to start something new.

Dialogue is not simply a slogan or sentiment. It needs to be a way of life. I offer these alternative commandments in a dialogical spirit. I welcome conversation and revision. Both the act of dialogue and the reflection on the nature of dialogue needs to be dialogically. Once one embarks on the task of learning from God wherever that truth is to find, one is always dialogical.

Footnotes

1. Raimundo Panikka, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1964, 1981) p.35
2. Bede Griffiths, *The Cosmic Revelation* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate 1983) p.16
3. I am grateful to Miriam Therese Winter who taught me this lesson. 'Women', she explained, 'don't start by reflecting theoretically on the possibility of prayer, but start by praying and then later start reflecting on how it is possible.' As the Chaplain of Hartford Seminary and Professor of Liturgy, Worship, and Spirituality, she models this approach in her own ministry. Often the most effective worship services she leads are focused around a candle (light is an almost universal symbol), with the words and readings coming from a variety of traditions.
4. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1964, 1981) p.23
5. Ibid. p.23
6. Tinu Ruparell, 'The Dialogue Party: Dialogue, Hybridity, and the Reluctant Other', in Viggo Mortensen (ed.) *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 2003) p.238
7. Ibid. p.244
8. Karl Rahner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions", *Theological Investigations*, v.5 (London: Longman & Todd, 1966), p.121.
9. I have an extended discussion of toleration in my *Plurality and Christian Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994) pp.10-2