

Rethinking Relations between Religions in a Polarized World: Principles of Interreligious Dialogue according to Leonard Swidler

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Abstract:

Regardless of which religious culture we belong to, which also marks our identity, the evidence of religious diversity is indisputable. In the circuit of the dynamics of inter-relationship in social, economic, cultural plan, religion is trained in the rhythm of globalization, some being de-located and re-located in spaces foreign to their own identities. The experience of the proximity of another religion provokes a way of relating to it, beyond conflicts. This article explores Leonard Swidler's coordinates of interreligious dialogue as an instrument of relationship in religious diversity.

***Keywords:** interreligious dialogue, Leonard Swidler, globalization, polarized society*

Introduction

Religion itself, regardless of its identity, has a dialogical dimension that places man in relation to God. Dialogue thus becomes a point of intersection of the human and the divine, the immanent and the transcendent. But dialogue also has a practical dimension, not only metaphysical: people dialogue with each other, in various forms of communication in the everyday context. And these people who dialogues belong to different religious cultures. In the perspective of mutual tolerance, beyond the exclusive doctrinal claims, dialogue can be an instrument, which, at least on a personal and institutional level, is effective.

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1. Religious identity in the new polarized world

The world enters a new stage, the experience of interconnecting all religions, nations, civilizations beyond the boundaries of identity, culture, social, political, namely the experience of global civilization. Globalization is shaping the world of the 21st century, representing, in equal measure, an opportunity for transparency and visibility, for knowledge through new digital communication techniques, which facilitate the information circuit with incredible speed, but also a challenge of relativization, of modeling diversity in a still superficial, in an anonymous uniformity. The core of emerging (postmodern) global civilization is *religion-in-dialogue*, religions among themselves, religion with society (secular and pluralist), but also religion in dialogue with itself.¹ This is what marks the transition “from an era of monologue to one of global dialogue.”²

Promoting dialogue is considered a necessity in increasingly religiously diverse societies. Dialogue includes processes of understanding, in a broader sense, both between religions (*interreligious dialogue*) and within religions (*intrareligious dialogue*), as well as between religion / religions and other societal subsystems (*religion-society dialogue*). In the logic of contemporary reality, Peter L. Berger It states that we can speak of two dualisms: (1) *religious dualism*, i.e., the coexistence of different religions in the same society, and (2) *religion-state dualism*, i.e., between religions and secular space.³

If the polarization of society intensifies, becoming interdependent at all levels, man must define his position in this world as a citizen of a state, as a participant in a social culture, as a believer affiliated with a religious system. The space in which it is located is growing exponentially through globalization. The world is becoming increasingly interdependent at all levels. The de-localization and re-localization of some identity religious cultures has intensified the democratic horizon, so that the sphere of the human citizen status multiplies in meanings, in the sense that it resizes globally, remaining at the same time a citizen of its own nation.

Therefore, in order to remain a full citizen of one's own nation and to become a citizen globally, adopting democratic and ethical values, man must optimally develop the basic skills of knowing and deciding/ loving, using all human faculties (rational, emotional, physical). This means: (1) to intelligently hold a position, while being open to the other; and (2) to think clearly and critically and decide/love with care-so the differing worldviews we humans build can be creatively related in a dialogic, critically reflective, and caring manner.⁴

2. The *Decalogue* of interreligious dialogue in Leonard Swidler approaches

Leonard Swidler⁵, one of the most prolific researchers in the field of interreligious dialogue, systematized a “decalogue” of the dialogical relationship between believers of different religions. The scheme can be applied to any religious tradition.

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.⁶ Dialogue is the relationship that impacts the consciousness of the actors involved in this process. On the one hand, the dialogue contracts both individual consciousnesses towards a communicative congruence, and on the other hand it highlights the differences. I believe “this”, he believes “this”, which proportionally changes my attitude towards him. Change is not a superficial one, but it operates significantly inside me, which resizes our cognitive field: we take note of another pattern of thinking about the universe, social reality, and divinity.

SECOND COMMANDMENT: Interreligious, interideological dialogue must be a two-sided project within each religious or ideological community and between religious or ideological communities.⁷

The objective of interreligious dialogue is learning, change, not in one's own identity, but in responsible and objective reporting

to the other, but also the development of a flexible personality beyond the rigidity of identity barriers, sometimes exclusive. The dialogue aims at a double trajectory: the dialogical relationship with the other who belongs to another religion and the dialogical relationship with those who belong and participate in the same religious identity with me. Thus, we have the opportunity to share the brothers' own experience of dialogue in the community space of faith.

THIRD COMMANDMENT: Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity.⁸ Honesty and sincerity are absolutely necessary conditions in cultivating an effective interreligious dialogue. False intention in dialogue leads to the failure of one's own limit. The same degree of honesty and sincerity must be shared by both actors in the dialogue. The absence of honesty invalidates any premise of the functionality and continuity of interreligious dialogue, because in this relational process the only interest that must prevail must be identified together with the other.

FOURTH COMMANDMENT: In interreligious, interideological dialogue we must not compare our ideals with our partner's practice.⁹ The partners engaged in the dialogue correspond to different cultural, social, philosophical universes. In this order of ideas, my ideal may not correspond to the ideal of my partner, who configures his practice. The same situation can be applied in the opposite direction.

FIFTH COMMANDMENT: Each participant must define himself.¹⁰ This is a sensitive point, because it implies the admissibility of difference, otherness, not in a sense of reporting superiority over inferiority, but in the meaning of self-definition. This exercise is not static, but dynamic. The complexity of the structure of my being participates in the dialogue with the other. It is an act of presence located in a common dynamic of coexistence in the intersected universes, an experience that leads to a more articulate definition of one's identity, of what it means to be a participant in one's own religious tradition.

Each participant in the dialogue defines himself theologically, which does not have to create a hiatus. Dialogue guided by the ideal of deeper theological debates. The theological background remains, indisputably, a perpetual challenge for the participants, although it is immersed in a whole range of challenges of the contemporary world. On the other hand, it is absolutely necessary to seek an internal theological coherence in every religion before opening up to external interreligious relations. However, the very gesture of seeking internal coherence before opening to external interfaith relations and effective engagement in theological debates, despite the continuation of deep inner divisions, actually illustrates the paradoxical situation that religions must face: how can religions, who are deeply divided in themselves, to seek closeness to other religions and even hope for the harmonization of doctrinal points of view, while having to overcome the lack of internal coherence? A pertinent and realistic question asked by Ionuț Untea.¹¹ A much more sustained effort must be made. Not at the level of protocol meetings, between authorities claimed to be legitimate voices of authority and leadership of religious freedom. The simple man is deprived of such protocol experiences. He himself faces a number of problems every day. In fact, religious resources are contained in the four main elements of a religion: *religious ideas* (the content of faith), religious practices (ritual behavior), *social organization* (religious community) and *religious or spiritual experiences* (psychic attitudes).

On the other hand, members of a religion may assume that their leaders are taking the path of dialogue only because they have to adapt to the progressive trends of their societies, which highlights a gap between religious and religious leaders, which can manifest itself in which challenge authority, schisms and individual and collective actions that simply ignore the prescriptions of leaders. There is a need for a deeper commitment to cultivating both inner trust (between believers and religious leaders) and outer trust (between members of

different faiths), which will allow the development of a deeper maturity in interfaith beliefs and relationships.¹²

SIXTH COMMANDMENT: Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are.¹³ This stage of interreligious dialogue forces the capacity and integrity of each participant to be a real partner in the dialogue. It is the moment when the comfort of one's own identity is located under the empire of approving the partner's opinion at the same time without altering our own axiological criteria of our own faith. Interreligious dialogue is an intentional approach that takes place at the institutional and personal level, an assumed space of sincerity and commitment to accept that differences, at least theological, doctrinal, are impossible to negotiate. The debates together should not aim at eliminating differences, but at confronting them with the intention of understanding each other's position. After all, each religion is in a moving flow and contextualization of its own tradition.

The dialogue is grounded and advances towards the meaning of friendship, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki's remark being essential to this context: "Friends discover their points of irreducible disagreement as well as their points of agreement. To increase in knowledge of the other is to realize that the differences go deep. There is not necessarily agreement on what constitutes the ills of the world, or even why those ills exist. This simply reflects the reality that the religions of the world are not reducible to one another; friendship does not mean sameness, it means a commitment to respect the other in difference, and to work with the other in areas of common agreement."¹⁴ Friends do not always agree. In fact, friendship can lead to severe differences of opinion and practice. Friends reach a level of mutual tolerance, even in contradictory debates, if they have the constructive capacity to relate concretely to differentiated identity elements.¹⁵

SEVENTH COMMANDMENT: Dialogue can take place only between equals.¹⁶The partners must express a kenotic attitude, the zero point being the start of the construction of the dialogue through a common intention to learn from each other, beyond the exclusive claims of ownership over the truth. In dialogue we must keep our own identity. One cannot dialogue in a gray way, with an imprecise or fluctuating identity. Preserving identity does not mean living rigidly in terms of relationships with other people, with other Churches, with other peoples. A dialogue, first of all, puts people on an equal level. We also have the logic of religious tolerance, but always the tolerated one, being accepted although different from the one who tolerates, will have a minority and somewhat inferior state.

EIGHTH COMMANDMENT: Dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual trust.¹⁷ Trust is an expression of the other's intention to be legitimate. In the absence of this trust, the dialogue would be formal, short-lived and not focused on key issues. The construction of an interreligious dialogue is based on mutual trust. Only when both partners have become acquainted with each other, becoming friends, can topics of debate be addressed such as theological ones, which require a greater degree of argumentation and availability.

NINTH COMMANDMENT: Persons entering into interreligious, interideological dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious or ideological traditions.¹⁸Self-criticism is a condition of maturity and assuming a position in interreligious dialogue, by the fact that it constantly polishes the act of presence in the relationship with the other. Such self-criticism could adjust interreligious dialogue to another level: that of overcoming the idea that this dialogue is limited exclusively to the promotion of peace. The common opinion, which tends to reduce the role of interreligious dialogue at the level of an instrument for combating religious conflicts, brings great disservice, especially to monotheistic religions, by producing the undesirable effect of their

description as conflicting religions, violent religions. On the other hand, this perception also plays a detrimental role in a religious community because one might think that the reason for the dialogue is the elimination of extremist manifestations of the faith.

TENTH COMMANDMENT: Each participant eventually must attempt to experience the partner's religion or ideology from within.¹⁹ Each member must engage in a "transition" into the other's religious experience and then return to its own tradition. According to Abe Masao²⁰, interreligious dialogue is an opportunity for mutual knowledge and should be guided by the following scheme: (1) first, to understand the perspective of the other's faith from within, without compromising the own faith of each of the actors participating in this dialogue, to the extent that they are able to see how things are from the other's point of view; (2) second, it must follow the return to perspective on one's faith; (3) thirdly, on the basis of the first two exercises, it will be possible to initiate a fruitful dialogue that effectively responds to the problems of today's society.

Conclusions

Principles of interreligious dialogue according to Leonard Swidler can be a start point in building bridges between religions in order to think *together* solutions at the contemporary religious and social challenges: poverty, conflicts, humanitarian crises. If it is sincerely supported and carried out on the premise of a social congruence, the dialogue between religions opens new horizons of normality of the condition of contemporary man. A dialogical conscience promotes religious freedom and the value of human dignity in a pluralistic world. Dialogue is a principle of coexistence, which interconnects different mentalities, related beliefs, strangers and relatives, becoming a tool that facilitates communication between religious traditions.

References

1. I notice here the clarifications of Ioan Alexandru TOFAN. In his opinion, *secularization* is what “prepares” religion for its postmodern public presence. The stake of modernity, through the process of secularization, was to adjust the relations of religion with the state and to ensure for the latter the main role in society. From a postmodern perspective, secularization is both a mutation and an inner stake of religion. It no longer adjusts the relationship between religion and the state, but the relationship of religion with itself, defining its dialogical nature; precisely this dialogical nature determines the religious traditions to be “permeable” to the criteria of communicative rationality and prepares them for their public expression. See Ioan Alexandru TOFAN, “Secularization and Religious Pluralism. Towards a Genealogy of Public Space”, in *European Journal of Science and Theology*, Vol.7, No. 2 (2011), 5-15.
2. Leonard J. SWIDLER, „Religious Diversity and a Global Ethic”, in Chad MEISTER, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity* (Oxford University Press, 2011),128.
3. Peter L. BERGER, “Toward a New Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age”, in Anna KÖRS, Wolfram WEISSE and Jean-Paul WILLAIME (eds.), *Religious Diversity and Interreligious Dialogue* (Springer, 2020), 22.
4. Leonard SWIDLER, “Freedom of Religion and Dialogue”, in *Facilitating Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Deskbook* (Springer Science Business Media, B.V., 2004), 767. For L. SWIDLER, dialogue means to: “(1) Reach out in openness to the other in the search for truth and goodness. (2) Be open to the other primarily so we can learn and find truth and goodness. (3) Perceive that for us to learn, to find the good, the other must teach and open themselves-and vice versa. (4) Recognize that because dialogue is a two-way project, we then *both* learned share the good. (5) Learn there are other ways of understanding, of embracing the world, than our own. (6) Learn to recognize our commonalities and differences-and value both. (7) Learn to move between different worlds and integrate them in care. (8) Learn that deep dialogue thus gradually transforms our inner selves-and our shared lives.” (*ibidem*, p. 769).
5. Dr. Leonard SWIDLER (born in 1929) is Founder & President of the Dialogue Institute. Also he was Professor of *Catholic Thought* and *Interreligious Dialogue in the Religion*, Department of Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
6. Leonard SWIDLER, “Freedom of Religion and Dialogue”, 773.

7. *Ibidem*.
8. *Ibidem*.
9. *Ibidem*, 774.
10. *Ibidem*.
11. Ionuț UNTEA, "Contemporary Uses of the Golden Rule of Reciprocity in Abrahamic Interfaith Discourses", in *Studies in Religion*, Vo. 47, Issue 1 (2018), 23.
12. *Ibidem*, 25.
13. Leonard SWIDLER, "Freedom of Religion and Dialogue", 774.
14. Marjorie Hewitt SUCHOCKI, *Divinity & Diversity. A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 119.
15. *Ibidem*, 120.
16. Leonard SWIDLER, "Freedom of Religion and Dialogue", 774.
17. *Ibidem*, 775.
18. *Ibidem*.
19. *Ibidem*.
20. Abe MASAO, *Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue. Part One of a Two-Volume Sequel to Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 13-14.