Toward a Gender-Aware Approach to Abrahamic Dialogue, By Virginia A. Spatz

Abstract

Interfaith dialogue, in practice, frequently overlooks gender as a key element in faith experiences, despite academic recognition of gender's interaction with spirituality, religious experience, and faith community roles. Abrahamic dialogue often includes men and women with substantially gendered views and practices. Moreover, dialogue itself can raise gender issues for participants from egalitarian communities. Dialogue lacks a systematic approach to this reality. This article examines Leonard Swidler's popularly referenced "Dialogue Decalogue," along with some "new" commandments for feminist men proposed in 1973, to suggest the beginnings of a systematically gender-aware approach to Abrahamic dialogue.

Introduction

While academic circles have long recognized a variety of ways in which gender interacts with spirituality, religious experience, and roles in faith communities, the practice of interfaith dialogue generally fails to incorporate any such recognition. Guidelines for inter-religious and interfaith dialogue rarely discuss gender. Abrahamic dialogue has developed no systematic approach to gender as a key element in faith experience, although men and women – especially older participants and those from Muslim or orthodox Jewish communities – may bring substantially gendered views. Moreover, Abrahamic dialogue itself can raise gender issues for participants otherwise unaccustomed to facing these on a regular basis.

This article examines Leonard Swidler's popularly referenced "Dialogue Decalogue," along with some "new" commandments for feminist men proposed in 1973, to suggest the beginnings of a systematically gender-aware approach to Abrahamic dialogue. While text-based, this article makes no claims to "scholarship," and examples throughout are from the author's personal experience as a woman, a Jew, and a participant in interfaith worship and study.

Swidler's Decalogue and Gender Awareness

Background

One of the most commonly cited sets of guidelines for inter-religious and interfaith dialogue is "The Dialogue Decalogue."[1] The document is on reading lists for interfaith courses, including those at Auburn and Hartford Seminaries. It is used as the basis for many dialogues and has been copied and/or adapted many time since its publication.

Nowhere does Swidler's "Decalogue" mention women or gender, and most adaptations available by Internet search do not reference gender.[2] In 2004, Ian Markham, of Virginia Theological Seminary, developed "A New Decalogue," including a commandment to "recognize any political, economic, or gender issues in the dialogue." He explains:

> ...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.[3]

With rare exception (Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations, 2008, e.g.),[4] this new commandment does not seem to have influenced basic guidelines for inter-religious and interfaith dialogue. Several points in Swidler's original "Decalogue" suggest avenues for exploring gender within interfaith dialogue.

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Recognizing Oneself

Swidler's "Fifth Commandment" says that "each participant must define himself," adding: "Conversely—the one interpreted must be able to recognize herself in the interpretation."

Women and men in some Abrahamic faith communities live very different religious lives and must be offered opportunities to define themselves and recognize themselves in dialogue. Where gender-segregation in worship and other aspects of communal life is the norm, it is important to recognize gender-based religious sub-communities. In such cases, men and women participating in inter-religious dialogue with other faith communities may need to engage in some degree of "inter-religious" dialogue across gender divides in their own communities as well.

In some Jewish communities, for example, the ritual bath [*mikvah*] and observances at the new moon [*rosh chodesh*] play key roles in the spiritual lives of many women, individually and communally.[5] In addition, many Jewish women regularly recite psalms for a list of individuals, loved ones, and strangers, in need of healing or rescue, and connect with one another around this practice. Men might find meaning in *mikvah, rosh chodesh*, and/or reciting psalms, but these would not likely be defining elements for a male Jew. Thus, without careful attention to gender, some participants might never recognize themselves in the dialogue's portrait of "Jew." On the other hand, a woman who prepares for daily prayers with a prayer-shawl and *tefillin* (ritual items used only by men in some communities) and defines herself in terms of contributions to the local *minyan* [prayer quorum] might not recognize herself in a portrait outlined by "women's practices," such as those mentioned above.

Here are some examples of recognition questions for consideration in Abrahamic dialogue:

- Are participants selected with a view to including participants from male and female sub-communities?
- Are men and women, especially those from communities with strong gender divides, both given opportunities to define their own experiences?
- When a woman does not recognize herself in an interpretation of her faith, is her experience understood as variant or even aberrant? Or is it accepted as an equally valid experience of that faith?
- When a man does not recognize himself in an interpretation of his faith, is his experience adopted as traditional or more correct? Or is it accepted as an equally valid experience of that faith?

From Within

Swidler's "Tenth Commandment" requires participants to "attempt to experience the partner's religion or ideology 'from within.'" Swidler adds, "Religion or ideology is not merely something of the head, but also of the spirit, heart, and 'whole being,' individual and communal." He cites Raimundo Panikkar (1918-2010), a prominent Roman Catholic proponent of inter-religious dialogue: "To know what a religion says, we must understand what it says, but for this we must somehow believe what it says." But the view 'from within' can be very different for women and men. And this raises a number of issues for dialogue.

An example: I helped organize an inter-denominational Jewish worship service, led by women, in solidarity with Women of the Wall,[6] an organization dedicated to the right of women to collective prayer at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. After much discussion about inclusivity and equality, a planning group chose to adopt a version of the "women's prayer" structure used by Women of the Wall. This allowed orthodox women to participate but involved conducting the service—contrary to practice of many involved—as though there were no *minyan* present. This meant asking women who ordinarily participate in services without gender-based restrictions to

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agree, for the purposes of this service, that they "do not count" toward a *minyan*.[7] It also meant asking men involved, regardless of their regular practice, to adopt the "non-counting" of women and related limitations on the worship service.

The decision and the reasons for it were included in advance publicity and in handouts and announcements on the day of the service. As the service unfolded, however, several women raised the possibility of following their own community's practice for determining a *minyan* so they could recite *kaddish* [sanctification of God's name] in honor of a deceased loved one. During the brief discussion about how to proceed, one woman angrily protested that the service was being conducted "based on a fiction anyway."

Most of the participants in this service later reported that they found the worship instructive as well as spiritually enriching. Even so, many egalitarian Jews said they experienced difficulty bringing themselves into a world where women were not counted—even temporarily and for a cause they supported. Meanwhile, some Orthodox Jews had trouble understanding why the "ordinary" practice of a women's prayer group involved so much angst.

- When approaching a gender-determined religion, how might someone committed to egalitarianism "believe what it says?" Is an egalitarian view optional for men? For women?
- When approaching an egalitarian religion, how might someone committed to gender-determining legal views "believe what it says?" Can full partnership between women and men be come and go?
- What are the implications for a person's 'whole being' in being asked to make this kind of shift?
- Can a woman kept apart from worship action—in a women's gallery or separate room—ever get 'within' the faith experience of dialogue brothers?
- Can a man—kept away women's prayer groups and worship spaces—ever get 'within' the faith experience of dialogue sisters?

Between Equals

Swidler's "Seventh Commandment" states that "dialogue can take place only between equals." It is clear that the author had in mind that no broad religious category—Jews, Christians, etc.—should view itself as superior to another. But gendered experience complicates the challenge of meeting as equals.

An example: Participants in the most recent "Building Abrahamic Partnerships" program at Hartford Seminary (June 2011) joined small group visits to mosques, synagogues, and churches. Many participants had attended *jum'ah* (Friday teaching and prayers) at the same, English-speaking mosque. Our mutual debriefing illustrated very different experiences for women and men.

Upon arrival, women gathered in an upstairs room. We were actively welcomed by the imam's wife and other regulars. We learned the mosque's history, including its history in the Nation of Islam. We were surrounded by preparations for the post-service meal, asked about our own worship communities, and encouraged to participate in future activities local and national. We watched the *khutbah* [sermon] and followed prayers via closed-circuit TV.

One Muslim woman objected to this segregation. Some Muslim and non-Muslim women reported conflicts of philosophical, psychological, and spiritual natures in regard to the forced separation, and one Muslim woman brought her objections to the male leadership. All women reported difficulty in following the prayers via TV.

Upon arrival, men gathered downstairs. They, I later learned, were greeted by regulars and listened to the *khutbah* and participated in *jum'ah* from the main prayer space. Male

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visitors did not learn the mosque's history, were separated from food preparations, and did not report special encouragement to participate in future activities. While some men reacted strongly to the gender segregation, afterward in discussion, none reported these issues as their experience at the mosque.

Later, in debriefing, it was clear that the men's experience—devoid of history and some aspects of communal welcome—was quite different from the women's, for both Muslim and non-Muslim visitors. Abrahamic dialogue can acknowledge such gender-based differences within a larger faith community, treating all as equally valid. Or it can affirm, however unwittingly, experiences from only one side of a religious gender divide.

Further complicating matters, of course, are conflicts within our various religious communities regarding the extent to which current gendered practices are accepted or contested. Moreover, our current religious landscape includes denominational and post-denominational communities representing a variety of gender-based and egalitarian ideologies. When participants from communities with different views and practices meet, an Abrahamic dialogue can acknowledge the differences and treat all as equally valid—in theory, at least. In practice, however, gendered and egalitarian ideas do not easily coexist.

Here are some examples of equality questions for consideration in Abrahamic dialogue:

- Where women's and men's experiences differ by religious law as well as custom, are both sets of experiences presented and represented in dialogue?
- Are men's and women's experiences treated as "equal?" Or, is one gender's experience deemed "alternative" and another "normative?"
- Where there are intra-religious differences in approach to gender, are all accepted? Or is one declared "normative" and others "alternative?"
- Is the weight of gender-based discrimination, historical and contemporary, acknowledged?
- How can dialogue approach conflicts between egalitarian and gender-determined religious views?

Equalitarian and Gendered Tradition

"A Modest Beginning"

Nearly 40 years ago, Jewish feminist Esther Ticktin suggested "A Modest Beginning:"[8]

> The social reality I speak of is the existence of a significant number of new Jewish women: women who have not been socialized to accept the traditional exclusion of women from full and equal participation in the spiritual and intellectual life of Judaism. These new Jewish women now feel like strangers in the house of Israel and are begging, asking, demanding or screaming (depending on their temperament and tolerance for injustice) not to be shunted off behind a mehitza (partition), to be counted as equals in minyan [prayer quorum], to be called up to the Torah, to be allowed and trained to lead the congregation as slichei tzibur ["messengers of the community"]...The excluded are not, after all, the unknown and unknowing strangers; they are your mothers, sisters, wives and daughters whose eyes have been opened and who now know that they have been kept out...[9]

Ticktin argues that the injunction against oppressing a stranger prohibits excluding women from equal participation in religious life. Moreover, she explains, Jewish law forbids benefiting from another's exclusion.

Back in 1973, Ticktin asked men to consider the effect of exclusion on their sisters and

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advocated for viewing egalitarian practices as more essential than custom, "based more or less on the prevailing mores of the non-Jewish world." Instead, she said, egalitarian principles must have the weight of law. The article concludes with a proposal that the Jewish community "move in the direction of making [these new laws] binding on ourselves." Nearly four decades later, the Jewish community has made substantial strides in this direction but has yet to meet this challenge entirely.

"Partnership" practices have evolved in the Jewish community in recent years to allow women more leadership opportunities; a small number of orthodox women have been ordained with titles approaching that of "rabbi." Women are still excluded from central roles in most Orthodox Jewish worship, however. Similarly, Muslim women are largely excluded from worship leadership, as are some Christian women. Consequently, Abrahamic dialogue today still faces, and sometimes precipitates, the "stranger" experience Ticktin describes in "A Modest Beginning." Therefore, Abrahamic partnerships may need to consider proposals similar to those Ticktin made in 1973.

"A Modest Continuation"
Here are some proposed guidelines based on Ticktin's decades-old commandments:

1) Faith communities with a commitment to gender equity must represent that as a religious principle of weight, rather than a custom easily altered for the sake of cooperation. In the spirit of Swidler's "Seventh Commandment" (meeting "equal with equal"), neither egalitarianism nor tradition should be understood to trump the other. Both must be presented, by their practitioners, as authentic expressions of faith.

2) Where women are excluded from aspects of a community's religious life—from physical prayer space, from worship leadership, from scholarship and teaching opportunities, from community leadership or ordination—acknowledge that. Let women and men express the effect, from within, of any exclusion they experience and define their own experiences from wherever their religious lives are centered.

3) Where inter-religious dialogue asks participants to understand and/or temporarily adopt practices and philosophies that exclude women, acknowledge that. Let women and men express the effect of any exclusion they experience.

4) Where inter-religious dialogue asks participants to understand and/or temporarily adopt practices and philosophies that give men and women unfamiliar roles, acknowledge that. Let women and men express the effect of any alteration of roles they experience.

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Notes

[1] Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious, Interideological Dialogue" in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 20:1 (Winter 1983).

[2] Cf, e.g.: The Institute of Interfaith Dialog [http://www.interfaithdialog.org/reading-room-main2menu-27/115-interreligious-and-intercultural-dialogue-guidelines]; Jewish Community Center of Victoria (Australia) [http://www.jccv.org.au/uploads/JCCV Interfaith Guidelines.pdf]; Anglican Church of Canada [http://www.anglican.ca/faith/eir/idf-guidelines]

[3] Ian Markham, "A New Decalogue," Lecture three of the Teape Lectureship in India (December 2004).

[4] Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations, "Guiding Principles for Interreligious Relations" (Adopted February, 11, 2008).

[5] Traditionally, most "time-bound" commandments – including participating in public prayers – are not incumbent on women. On the other hand, there are three commandments specifically enjoined on women: the laws of family purity (including visiting the mikvah after every menstrual period), "taking challah" (offering a small portion of the dough when baking), and the kindling of sabbath candles (Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbat 31a). The monthly festival of the new moon is particularly associated with women. See, for example, this article at My Jewish Learning. http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Rosh_Chodesh/Women.shtml

[6] http://womenofthewall.org.il/

[7] In egalitarian Jewish congregations, men and women participate equally in reciting and leading prayers, in reading from and reciting blessing over the Torah. When a minyan is not present in any congregation–including in orthodox women's prayer groups–certain prayers are not recited.

[8] http://www.interfaithandgender.org/amodestbeginning.htm

[9] Ticktin, Esther, "A Modest Beginning," in *The Jewish Woman: An Anthology. Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review*, Number 18, Jewish Student Press Service (Summer 1973).