

Dialogue Speaks Louder as Action: Defining Interreligious Dialogue in Four Stages

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Interreligious dialogue is interpreted differently by governments, civil society, religious communities, and the general public thus the term's meaning is often misconstrued, and its trajectories limited. To clarify expert opinions on the essence and purpose of interreligious dialogue, this article presents an operational definition by drawing on the 1991 Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue's categorization of the forms of interreligious dialogue: 1) the dialogue of life, 2) the dialogue of religious experience, 3) the dialogue of theological exchange, and 4) the dialogue of action.¹ This article argues that the four dialogues are stages offering an optimal platform for achieving the objectives of interreligious dialogue and ultimately, furthering the interfaith movement. I expand on interreligious dialogue's definition, function, and goals through theological reflections, visualization techniques, illustrations, and literary analysis. First, the four dialogues will be defined and examples provided. Second, the definition of a "dialogue of action" will be amended to include its inherent meaning of concrete action. Third, I will provide an example of a thorough and specialized examination of the meaning of interfaith dialogue by expanding on Christian teachings of the term and the four dialogues. To make progress, our social conception must expand to better understand the four stages of interfaith dialogue as components that form the meaning of interreligious dialogue.

Keywords: Action, dialogue, interfaith, interreligious, peacebuilding, peacemaking

Fear, confusion, skepticism, ignorance, and animosity often influence opinions about interreligious dialogue. For these reasons and many others, like the term's extensive relationship to an assortment of ideas and definitions, it is difficult to define interreligious dialogue, which this article will use interchangeably with "interfaith dialogue."² The term is often viewed as a deeply confusing and complex idea. A brief Google search on the definition of "interfaith dialogue," for example, reveals that it is described as "complex." It is also presented as "a challenging process." Complex interpretations of interfaith dialogue further negative opinions about the practice. Certain communities profoundly misunderstand the meaning and function of the term. While some are concerned that interreligious dialogue will result in the weakening of their faith, for example, others fear that such conversations will compromise their religious identity. And to make matters worse, many define "interfaith dialogue" either by relying on their subjective opinion and/or in a manner that suits their particular institutions' agenda.

¹ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Forms of Dialogue, Holy Roman See* (The Vatican: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1991), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/index.htm.

² While some scholars use the terms "interfaith dialogue" and "interreligious dialogue" interchangeably, others argue that the two terms are not interchangeable in meaning. This article acknowledges this differentiation technique for exploring more specialized topics of interfaith, but does not make this distinction. This piece aims to teach about the term's purpose and to clarify how "interreligious dialogue" is defined. To clarify the term's definition and to better present overarching themes and meanings in a wide-ranging field of study, this article presents the two terms "interfaith dialogue" and "interreligious dialogue" as synonymous.

Defining Interreligious Dialogue

Only in the last century have interreligious dialogue exchanges gained a solid foothold in socio-political and religious arenas. Yet, most people are generally uninformed about the meaning of interfaith dialogue, let alone its goals. Half a century ago the Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*, redefined the meaning of interreligious dialogue for Catholics. Due, in part, to this monumental Pontifical document, for the first time in history, interfaith objectives were examined and addressed on a global scale. Governments, religious communities, businesses, and the general public can better achieve interfaith dialogue's goals if a clear definition is presented that provides a strong platform for better understanding and engaging in interreligious dialogue.

I came across an inadequate definition of interreligious dialogue in the *Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*: "Interreligious dialogue is best defined as an intentional encounter and interaction among members of different religions as members of different religions."³ Although this description lightly touches upon the general components that scholars agree are necessary for engaging in the practice of interreligious dialogue, this definition offers a one-dimensional, insufficient, and uninformative explanation. Interreligious dialogue is not "best defined" in such broad terms, as the term's meaning is already shrouded in confusion. Interreligious dialogue is often used as a broad umbrella term that covers a comprehensive range of meanings. Furthermore, interreligious dialogue's function and goals shape its platform and inform its meaning thus it is necessary to define the term by these components.

The concept of interfaith dialogue is similar to most religious affiliations in the sense that a religious tradition cannot be defined in limited terms and loses its meaning and substance if approached as a simplified and narrowed idea. By no means is this analogy meant to infer that interreligious dialogue is a form of religion. Rather, the concept of interreligious dialogue has a relatable association to all religions because its trajectory is informed by a plethora of faith traditions. The terms meaning covers a comprehensive range of practices, faiths, and the like. The term's definition is regularly interpreted as vast and intricate. Interfaith dialogue's goals are also extensive. Interfaith dialogue is not a one-dimensional concept such as presented by the *Oxford Handbook's* definition, as its substance is deep and core objectives wide-ranging.

"No peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions," wrote the scholar of ecumenical theology Hans Küng.⁴ One of interreligious dialogue's major objectives is to contribute to peacebuilding, which is broadly defined as promoting greater understanding and collaboration toward peace and unity in all social systems. How would conflicts and resolutions today take place if the vast majority of people did not understand the meaning of peace, and found the idea both difficult to define and "a challenging process"? Uninformed views about interfaith dialogue and its goals only limit promising avenues of peacemaking, which are, in themselves, challenging to forge.

As there are various objectives of interreligious dialogue and myriad interpretations of its function, this article will use a broad brush to primarily focus on its overarching objective of

³ Sallie B. King, "Interreligious Dialogue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, ed. Chad V. Meister (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 101–14, at 101.

⁴ Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future: The Religious Situation of Our Time*, (New York: Continuum), 1995.

peacemaking. But this is not to discount the other goals of interfaith dialogue such as its role in furthering mutual understandings and productive discussions, as the scholar Leonard Swidler emphasizes.⁵ Other interfaith experts, such as Adam Seligman, draw attention to how interfaith dialogue is a strong learning experience.⁶ Some argue that interreligious dialogue aims to bring about social justice, while many also see it as a form of communication offering avenues for co-existence. The interreligious activist and scholar, Dr. Mahbubur Rahman, introduced the definition of interreligious dialogue by summarizing its main objective.

The goal of this dialogue is not to eliminate differences of opinion and create a new religion, nor is it meant for seeking ways to defeat or silence others. Rather, its purpose is to create mutual understanding among the adherents of different faiths and traditions so that peaceful and meaningful co-existence becomes a reality.⁷

Most interfaith experts agree that the aims of interreligious dialogue generally fall under the umbrella of peacemaking. Thus, interfaith dialogue is a form of peacebuilding between peoples of different religions. In short, to offer a more robust and complete definition, we will examine interreligious dialogue’s abstract objective of peace, with special reference to religious plurality and interfaith unity.

By briefly examining the meaning as well as the etymology of “dialogue” we can better understand interreligious dialogue exchanges. In modernity, “dialogue” is primarily viewed as an exchange of information or a conversation where two participants seek to positively engage in a constructive and respectful exchange of ideas with another person. Among its multiple meanings, dialogue is known to be a form of scholarly rhetoric. Specifically, the Platonic dialogues present the dialectic as a pedagogical technique of orienting questions aimed to procure answers from a participant who applies methods of logical reasoning. Similarly, inquiry and reason play critical roles in interfaith dialogue exchanges.

Through collaboration, one learns that interfaith dialogue exchanges are informed by diverging paths of shared experiences, positive interactions, as well as constructive conversations. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue presents a two-part definition of dialogue. “[First,] at the purely human level, it means reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal or, at a deeper level, to interpersonal communion. Secondly, dialogue can be taken as an attitude of respect and friendship.”⁸ Dialogue is a form of logical discourse in an open-minded and honest discussion where an individual approaches communication with an inquisitive disposition seeking to both observe and learn about religious beliefs, traditions, and practices.

⁵ Leonard Swidler, *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding: Strategies for the Transformation of Culture-Shaping Institutions* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan), 2014.

⁶ Adam Seligman, David Montgomery, and Rachel Wasserfall, *Living with Difference: How to Build Community in a Divided World* (Oakland: University of California Press), 2015.

⁷ Rahman Mahbubur, “The Meaning and Making of Interfaith Dialogue,” *Message International*, (January 30, 2014), <https://messageinternational.org/the-meaning-and-making-of-interfaith-dialogue>.

⁸ This definition of “dialogue” also includes the following, “which permeates or should permeate all those activities constituting the evangelizing mission of the Church.” This section of the text was removed because interreligious dialogue is not a form of evangelizing. When presenting the function of “the Four Stages of Interreligious Dialogue,” this paper will expand on the reasons for this removal (Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Forms of Dialogue*, 1991).

The four stages of interreligious dialogue are the dialogues of life, religious experience, theological exchange, and action. Essentially, these four stages jointly provide a more powerful form of communication for mutual understandings and cooperative collaborations among persons of different faiths to take place. So defined, interreligious dialogue in full is a cooperative and positive exchange of collaboration between persons of different religious affiliations, executed through four stages of dialogue to ultimately achieve peace and interfaith unity.

The foundational underpinnings for the definition of interreligious dialogue are presented by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue as “the four forms of interreligious dialogue.” This article will refer to these four dialogues as stages forming a stronger platform for advancing the objectives of interfaith dialogue. To better contribute both to the definition and objectives of interreligious dialogue, each of the four dialogues must be understood and engaged as interconnected steps. Rather, the four dialogues must be approached and understood as separate and consequential steps contributing to a larger body of purpose—a stage in an interreligious dialogue exchange.

This article aims to minimize the confusion associated with the term’s broad-ranging meaning while also providing a platform to advance the progress of interfaith interactions. Interfaith dialogues’ peacebuilding objectives require a long-term commitment as well as a willingness for one to better understand and broaden their interfaith horizons. While one of “the four stages of interreligious dialogue” can minimally achieve interfaith goals, when practiced together they serve as a platform to strengthen peaceful narratives and further interfaith objectives. Next, the Pontifical definitions of the four stages of interreligious dialogue will be presented; then the definition of a “dialogue of action” will be subsequently amended.

The Four Stages of Interreligious Dialogue

The Dialogue of Life: This stage involves positive interactions through constructive conversations on different views, beliefs, and values. A process of approaching religious topics as a source of friendship and camaraderie. Understanding will likely develop amid sharing and discussing the human experience in concord.

The Dialogue of Religious Experience: A dialogue of religious experience is a constructive discussion about the human experience with special attention to the influences of religious and moral heritage. It is a respectful and appreciative exchange whereas one compares and contrasts diverse perspectives on the religious and spiritual dimensions of human life.

The Dialogue of Theological Exchange: The objective of the dialogue of theological exchange is to cultivate peace and harmony through a cooperative discussion on theological topics such as religious values and beliefs. This exchange involves clarifying theological and philosophical similarities and differences. Finally, at the core of the dialogue of action is a cooperative partnership for peacebuilding developments. As such, a deeper understanding is forged amid discussing respective religious backgrounds by collaborating on theological topics.

The Dialogue of Action: In a dialogue of action, each person actively appreciates and values the other through cooperative and positive exchanges that aim to advance the “integral development and liberation of people.”⁹

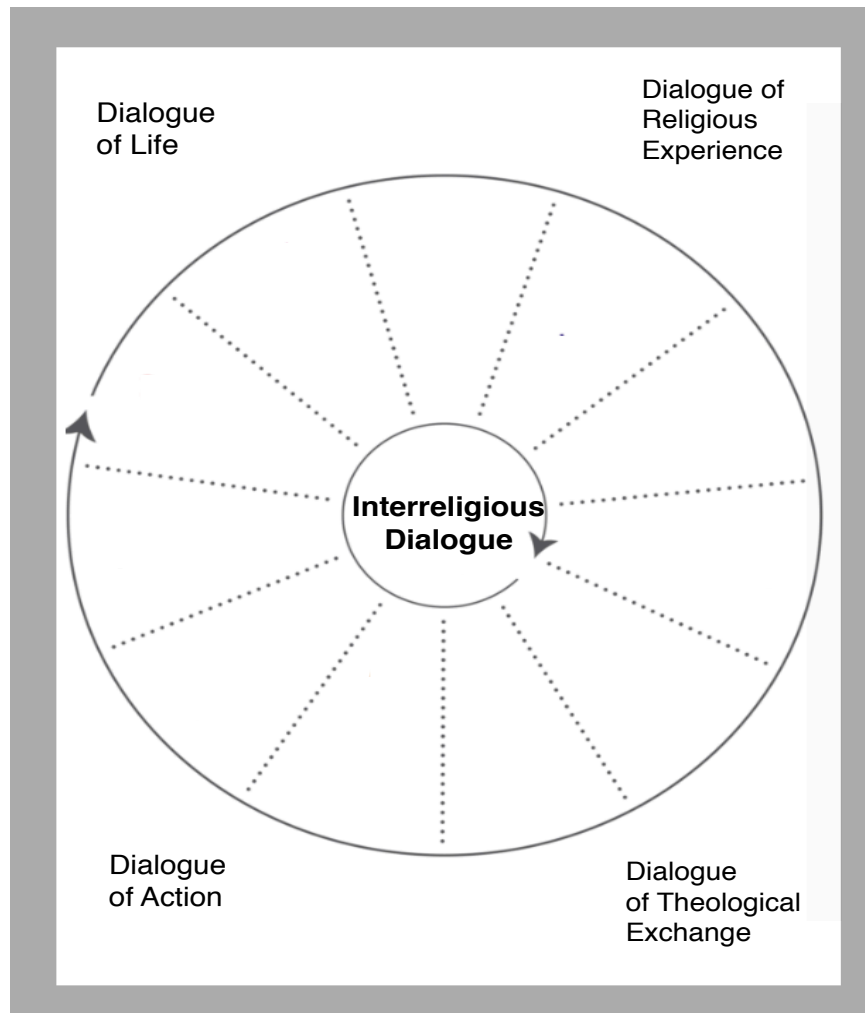


Figure 1. Diagram of the Stages of Interreligious Dialogue

All four dialogues are interconnected stages that more powerfully contribute to the goals of interreligious dialogue. When engaging in interfaith dialogue, one communicates in a series of steps or engages a sequence of topics related to each of the four dialogues. An individual may begin a conversation of theological exchange, for example, and then immediately return to the dialogue of life. The diagram consists of a circle to demonstrate that there is not a set order to approaching the stages (as all forms of communication are generally fluid). Additionally, each dialogue topic can overlap to a larger or smaller extent with one of the other stages. For, just as all four stages are equally important they also are reliant on the other dialogues for contributing to the objectives of interfaith dialogue.

⁹ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Forms of Dialogue*, 42b.

The two arrows in the diagram show that interfaith dialogue exchanges are regularly ongoing. Although each stage is not restricted to a set time frame, the four dialogues are meant to be practiced over a long period. Similar to all personal relationships, for instance, if both parties do not invest the time and prioritize each other than their relationship will likely deteriorate. The diagram's image of an unending circle places emphasis on the importance of maintaining longstanding and lasting communications. Furthermore, an individual may return to one of the four dialogues and continue to pursue the objectives of interfaith dialogue.

The image of the circle shows that at a given moment in time one may return to any of the four dialogues and approach such topics once more. As the twists and turns of conversations often reach unknown obstacles and challenges, the empty sections in the circle represent the potentiality of uncharted conversations, particularly because the four dialogue topics individually bring a diverse spectrum of interests and ideas. Furthermore, the dotted lines framing the section divisions in the circle are representative of the interdependent and relatable nature of interfaith topics.

The four dialogues each are correlated and interrelated stages under the broader scope of interreligious dialogue. The central placement of the term "interreligious dialogue" in the diagram illustrates that all interfaith exchanges are rooted and centralized in its goals of peacebuilding. Or, the common objectives of all four of the dialogues influence the topics of discussion. Individually, one of the four dialogues is not likely to fully accomplish the long term objectives of interreligious dialogue. That is not to say that the goals of interreligious dialogues are only achievable by engaging in all four dialogues. Rather, when the four stages are practiced together, they more powerfully contribute to the objectives of interreligious dialogue.

When approaching one of the four dialogues, it is important to demonstrate a disposition of inclusion and understanding by engaging in interreligious dialogue exchanges with a willingness to learn and collaborate. A positive and tolerant attitude is essential when discussing the similarities and differences of another's religious tradition. The following example illustrates two persons from different religions who productively engage in the four stages of interreligious dialogue by demonstrating collaboration, cooperation, and inclusion.

Freddy is a practicing Catholic and seeks to partake in interreligious dialogue with his new friend, John, who is a Tibetan Buddhist. Freddy begins a conversation with John on topics of the dialogue of life. The conversation turns to specifics about Freddy's religion in a dialogue of theological exchange. Freddy expands on his Christian understanding of "heaven and hell." While learning more about John's religion, he begins to brainstorm about the Christian afterlife. Specifically, Freddy describes the image of an ethereally lit heaven where baby cherubim hop and play on puffy white clouds. John responds by discussing how Dante Alighieri's Paradiso influenced the Christian conception of the afterlife that many know today. This interaction causes Freddy to question the origins of the commonly known image of "heaven." He realizes that the Bible does not present the imagery that he witnesses in aesthetic works thus, he mentions Michelangelo's "Last Judgement" fresco in the Sistine chapel to drive this point home.

John brings up the idea of "the heavens" versus outer space. For the first time, Freddy wonders about the Gospel-writers' conceptions of "heaven." He questions: how did the Gospel-writers' understanding of the Ptolemaic model influence the details of biblical stories (such as in Luke 3:21, when the heavens opened during Christ's baptism)? John surmises that the writers' understanding of the idea of "heaven" most likely developed from an amalgam of philosophical elements all grounded in Aristotle's theory of a space existing outside the earth's

atmosphere.¹⁰ For the first time, Freddy thinks about how the Copernican Revolution informed theologians’ understanding of the heavens and the universe.

John then introduces his conception of the realms of the afterlife known as “the world of the Bardo.” The conversation turns to the last stage of reincarnation when one’s energy is pulled into another life. On the topic of the Bardo, John expands on his belief that life is chosen by one’s good or bad karma (the consequences of previous actions). By examining the idea of “heaven” in relation to the Tibetan Buddhist conception of the afterlife, John considers metaphysical parallels between his tradition and Christianity. Consequently, the discussion abruptly changes to theological ethics.

Freddy later brings John a book that he believes is fundamental to his understanding of moral action and spirituality with God, *Confessions by Saint Augustine*. The exchange of a dialogue of action takes a step further when Freddy invites John to his religious community to participate in a ritual, a masked danced ceremony known as “Cham.” Both John and Freddy discuss how moral action informs the afterlife traditions of their respective religious traditions. Consequently, they agree that the human condition is one of learning, change, and growth.

In this example, Freddy and John practice all four of the stages of interreligious dialogue. They begin with the dialogue of life then proceed to touch upon the other three dialogues. They each engage in a dialogue of action thereby indicating that they are invested in collaborating and learning from the other. These actions communicate a message of respect and further demonstrate that each participant is committed to engaging in an interfaith dialogue exchanges.

In a dialogue of religious experience and theological exchange, one can compare and contrast with those from different religions and diverse walks of life, while also examining and learning more about their tradition from a new angle. The interreligious activist, Jaco Cilliers, summarizes the importance of each participant having a comprehensive grasp of their respective tradition: “interfaith dialogue is constructive only when people become firmly grounded in their own religious traditions and through that process gain a willingness to listen and respect the beliefs of other religions.”¹¹ Building on Cilliers’ observation, interreligious dialogue is a mutual witnessing to one’s faith tradition. But in addition to witnessing about one’s religion, while engaging in interfaith dialogue, it is important to remain open to the prospect of learning new things. First and foremost, one must respect other traditions. For example, due to their interreligious dialogue encounter, Freddy and John gain unique insights and understandings about their different traditions while also learning a great deal about a different religion and culture.

The four stages of interreligious dialogue center on objectives that are unachievable if approached in an exchange with explicit or implicit intentions of conversion. Collaboration, camaraderie, and respect are central to interreligious dialogue engagements. Approaching interfaith dialogue with an intent to convert, however, brings about a lack of trust, mutuality, and respect. Engaging in an interfaith conversation with the aim of conversion will likely demonstrate that one is unwilling to cooperatively exchange opinions; rather, they aim to change the mind of another. When approaching a dialogue of theological exchange with the goal of conversion, for example, one’s focus will primarily be on achieving goals that are unrelated to the four stages of

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis argues that, in classical antiquity, Aristotle’s answer to the question on what existed outside the universe, “...there is neither place nor void nor time,” was later adapted into the idea of the Christian heaven. See C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 97.

¹¹ Rahman, “The Meaning and Making of Interfaith Dialogue,” 2014.

dialogue. They will likely not learn from another in a collaborative exchange but instead demonstrate an attitude of exclusivity and superiority. Approaching interfaith dialogue with an intent to convert generally communicates an offensive, ingenuine, and disrespectful message. In short, proselytism or, an “intent to convert,” derails the four dialogue topics and it also obstructs the objectives of interreligious dialogue.

The four stages of interreligious dialogue span a wide array of topics; however, none of these subjects center on changing another’s religious belief or conception of truth. In actuality, interfaith dialogue engagements are an opportunity for an individual to understand their religious tradition from a new angle thus discovering unique insights about their religion. Although it is especially important to remain open-minded and non-judgmental when engaging in interfaith dialogue, the practice is not a compromise or an acceptance of another’s beliefs.¹² Freddy may have reexamined his conception of the afterlife, for example, but the dialogue did not change his traditional beliefs. Rather, interfaith dialogue strengthened his faith because he returned to old ideas with new insights. With the four stages of dialogue, one must be willing and prepared to think deeply about one’s religion and learn from this engagement. But these trajectories do not involve (in any form of fashion) a compromise or a relinquishing of one’s personal beliefs.

To reap the benefits of one of the four stages of interreligious dialogue, both participants must be well-versed in the practices and philosophies of their religions as well as have a strong enough faith to bear witness to their respective tradition. For example, as the conversation between Freddy and John developed, it furthered interfaith topics primarily because both participants were familiar with the beliefs of their traditions. As a result of a well-equipped knowledge about their religious backgrounds, Freddy and John brought something to the interfaith table for discussion.

Interreligious dialogue aids in helping participants gain clarity on problematic issues. For instance, both Freddy and John better understand aspects of their respective traditions by engaging in each of the four dialogues. After approaching a dialogue of religious experience and theological exchange when discussing the afterlife, John leaves the conversation with a renewed understanding of the Christian idea of “heaven.” The four stages of dialogue offer the platform for one to better examine the gray factors of their religion by further evaluating the black and white elements in a new light.

Interfaith dialogue exchanges require patience, respect, and goodwill along with a willingness to listen and perhaps reevaluate one’s position or reexamine the lens from which another came by their belief system. According to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Christians can learn and “allow themselves to be questioned. Notwithstanding the fullness of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, the way Christians sometimes understand their religion and practice it may be in need of purification.”¹³ Perhaps such “purification” begins with acknowledging that we all share commonalities. Rather, all humans—like their various forms of religious traditions—are imperfect. For, just as religions seek to build upon platforms of truth and perfection, such religious structures are designed by humans and thus imperfect.

¹² Interfaith activist Athar Shahid explains that “interfaith dialogue is not [about] accepting all or even part of the other faiths on a theological basis.” Athar Shahid, “The Mission of Muslim-Catholic Dialogue,” in Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, *Islam Is: An Experience of Dialogue and Devotion* (New York: Lantern Books, 2008), 113–26, at 117–18.

¹³ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Forms of Dialogue*, 1991.

The four stages of dialogue offer the opportunity to strengthen religious beliefs for one to better understand their religious tradition, as such communication often brings about unique and distinctive insights. Interfaith dialogue also provides unique avenues for one to gain a “big picture vision.” Such a fresh outlook about one’s religion is further broadened when a participant also learns about unknown traditions and cultures. The four stages of dialogue offer the platform for one to mentally migrate or examine different religious worldviews and religions in unique contexts. Thus, one is likely to return to their tradition with a better understanding—seeing their faith from a different, unique lens.

A Dialogue of Action: Amended Definition

A dialogue of action is defined by the Pontifical Council as a form of communicating “in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.”¹⁴ Interfaith dialogue’s inherent meaning of “action” is not represented in this description. This definition offers a solid platform for defining the term, but it does not capture a dialogue of action’s inherent meaning. This definition is also vague and abstract, leaving room for one to perceive of a dialogue of action not as a dynamic verb, but solely as a conversation centering on interfaith topics (like liberation or human development). Such a misinterpretation of a dialogue of action limits the scope and potential of interfaith dialogue trajectories.

“Action” is defined as “the process of doing something, especially when dealing with a problem or difficulty.”¹⁵ In a dialogue of action, one is “doing something” in communication by taking an active step towards collaboration and cooperation with another. It is necessary to define this term as a concrete action as this meaning will both represent a dialogue of action’s most powerful function as well as its interpretation will offer an ideal platform for achieving interfaith objectives. The numerous avenues of peace that interreligious dialogue exchanges forge cannot be fully paved if the term is not engaged as a dynamic verb.

I amend the Pontifical Council’s definition of a dialogue of action and define the term as a concrete practice that advances the integral development and liberation of people. A dialogue of action is a practical engagement that is a vital component to the definition and goals of interreligious dialogue. This dialogue further advances interfaith objectives of peace by presenting a long-lasting and substantial message. In defining a “dialogue of action” clearly as a verb, stakeholders can better understand and strongly engage interfaith dialogue exchanges.

A dialogue of action aims to encompass a form of “liberation” and seeks to bring about the “integral human development.” Yet, these goals are relatively unachievable without concrete action. Take, the goal of an “integral [human] development,” words may inform such trajectories but actions ultimately shape outcomes. For instance, a just and peaceful society is established on platforms that take into account the spiritual and material concerns of the human person; the personal and political; the mental and physical. But justice, peace, and liberation cannot be obtained or sustained with mere words.

¹⁴ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Forms of Dialogue*, §42b.

¹⁵ Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/action>

“No culture can appear or develop except in relation to a religion,” wrote T.S. Eliot. Religion serves as the seminal purveyor of otherwise inaccessible wisdom and existential catharsis. It is an ageless certainty that humankind searches for an ultimate meaning—something beyond ourselves—that weaves the very fabric of existence into being and stretches it to its breaking point. For, just as religion defines the human experience, interfaith dialogue plays a primary role in coloring and preserving this fabric of life. Interreligious dialogue not only advances trajectories that work towards justice and peace, but it also serves as a bridge to gap the divide between religious-cultural differences. Thus, it functions as a channel for one to better envision avenues of transcending peace and to gain spiritual/mental and material/embodied revelations in unity. Interfaith dialogue offers the platform for one to examine the richness of existence and this form of communication expands to further the advancement of human development.

The Greek word for theology, *theologia*, translates to mean “reasoned talk about God,” and this interpretation is remarkably similar to the meaning of “interfaith dialogue.”¹⁶ A reasoned talk with God begins with introspection, just as one’s background knowledge and attitude will primarily influence the outcomes of interfaith dialogue exchanges. This Greek translation of theology is also significant to Gustavo Gutiérrez argument that theology cannot take its inherent form unless the concept itself is understood as a discipline and engaged as a concrete action: “Theology is the understanding of the commitment, and the commitment is action.”¹⁷ His statement is predicated on the idea that the human condition is informed by religious experience and vice-versa. Gutiérrez would argue that a “reasoned talk with God” involves action. Gutiérrez quotes Pascal to expand on this idea: “all the things in this world are not worth one human thought, and all the efforts of human thought are not worth one act of charity.”¹⁸ And interfaith dialogue is limited to solely words if the term is not understood as both a practical verb and a noun. Such words are not likely to amount to one act of interfaith activism. To strengthen and foster religious ties one must be empowered to listen, lead, and serve.

Gutiérrez elaborates on the meaning of “theology” by using a statement similar to John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural address: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” The president’s empowering words called the American people forth to pursue an abstract vision. The statement instills in the listeners’ mind a relationship between freedom and action. Kennedy repeated this pronouncement twice emphasizing that practical action follows after self-reflection on the meaning of freedom and basic rights. Kennedy’s memorable words are similar to Gutiérrez’s statement, but also substantially different: “One should not ask of theology more than it can give.”¹⁹ With reference to liberation theology, Gutiérrez indicates that theology offers as much as humanity will allow. Similarly, one should “ask not of interreligious dialogue more than it can give.” Both Kennedy’s and Gutiérrez’s statements are powerful because they are contingent on the idea that a call to action begins with inquiry as well as an internal re-evaluation of one’s understanding of what they hold precious and self-evident. Likewise, interreligious dialogue first begins with internal change by being open and tolerant of

¹⁶ Robert Jenson, *A Theology in Outline: Can These Bones Live? Can These Bones Live*, transcribed, edited, and introduced by Adam Eitel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.

¹⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: 15th Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

different religions and cultures. This interfaith practice involves asking oneself demanding questions while also seeking to face difficulties in unity and collaboration with another.

The historical significance of concepts similar in meaning to interfaith dialogue and the lessons such ideas leave in their wake must be taken into consideration when defining interfaith dialogue. The trajectory of interreligious dialogue is similar to ideas that have an elaborate meaning and continue to shape the face of humanity such as liberation, justice, peace, and religious freedom. Said definitions were adapted over time to enhance the human experience. Concepts that are similar in meaning to interfaith dialogue were primarily defined by the actions that shaped their trajectory. As our future is wrapped up in the past, which is not wholly retrievable, when defining “interreligious dialogue” we must make every effort to know and examine these abstract existential ideas that are similar to the term’s meaning

Today, when most think of “freedom” knowingly or unknowingly, they envision an idea related to a dynamic verb. The definition of “religious freedom” adapted to fulfill a need; its new meaning came about after religious-inspired movements for fundamental human rights, toleration, and liberty.²⁰ The term is regularly interpreted as a consequence of action primarily because of the price that so many continue to pay for freedom; from the battlefield to daily life circumstances. Freedom, like peace, usually comes about after concrete action. Words hold power only when those who wield them actively facilitate change.

The three stages of dialogue may begin to offer avenues leading to peace, but interfaith engagements that lack a dialogue of action cannot fully bridge gaps between different traditions (especially when disunity already exists). Take, for instance, when the Jewish-Catholic interreligious dialogue in the late 1990s and early 2000s came to a culminating point of outreach in Jewish communities. The distinguished theological scholar and director of the Center for Interreligious Understanding, Rabbi Jack Bemporad, who is also known by his myriad students as Rabbi Jack, particularly remembers Pope John Paul II’s active commitment during this era. In a conference in Rome at the Centro Pro Unione, Bemporad described the Pope’s engagement with a dialogue of life and action.

No one could have predicted where the Pope’s personal outreach to the Jews, even *Nostra Aetate*, were leading. No one could have foreseen the extraordinary, in fact, miraculous step the Church would take under John Paul II’s guidance. This unimaginable step was taken in September of 1990 in Prague, when Cardinal Edward Cassidy, under the direction of the Pope, asked forgiveness of the Jews for acts of anti-Judaism on the part of Christians.²¹

²⁰ Prior to Vatican II’s *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Catholic Church was reluctant to fully support religious freedom in civil law. A Pontifical document drafted in 1997 affirms such religious freedom: “religious freedom affirms the right of all persons to pursue the truth and witness to the truth according to their conscience.” See “Report from the Fourth Phase of the Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue: Evangelization, Proselytism And Common Witness,” <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/it/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/pentecostali/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1997-evangelizzazione--proselitismo-e-testimonianza-comune/testo-in-inglese.html>.

²¹ Jack Bemporad, “Saint John Paul II’s Outreach to the Jewish Community” John Paul II Center, Centro Pro Unione, May 16, 2019.

In addition to pursuing interfaith dialogue avenues of peace and understanding between Jews and Catholics, Pope John Paul II read a prayer of weighty meaning, televised worldwide during a Millennial Service of Repentance in Israel. He asked for forgiveness of the Jews for acts of anti-Judaism.²² With this act of forgiveness, Pope John Paul engaged in a dialogue of action by stepping over a threshold and leaving behind Christian mistakes of the past to stand in the glory of a redemptive future.

In the Pope's historic visit to Israel, he further reinforced his message through a dialogue of action by personally placing a prayer into the weathered stones of the Western Wall. He asked for God's forgiveness for, as Bemporad puts it: "the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer."²³ With this symbolic gesture, the Pope approached interreligious dialogue with an extraordinary act—a dialogue of action—that was incredibly meaningful to the Jewish people. Rabbi Bemporad holds that it was not merely the Jewish-Catholic interreligious dialogue, but this concrete action of Pope John Paul II which ultimately left a lasting impression. He says: "I consider this act to be one of the greatest of the Catholic Church."²⁴ Through the Pope's engagement with the four stages of interreligious dialogue, particularly a dialogue of action, a bridge for peacemaking took shape between the Jews and Catholics.

Due to Pope John Paul's engagement with interreligious dialogue, primarily his dialogue of action, his message of Jewish-Catholic interreligious dialogue materialized into an interfaith movement. Bemporad discusses the 1990 act of repentance in Prague when the Pope used a Hebrew word, *Tshuvah*, meaning a new direction. Professor Bemporad claims that "the apology was spoken in a language that was directed to the hearts of Jews, not Christians."²⁵ Following these interfaith dialogue exchanges, Catholic Church representatives in European countries also asked for forgiveness, first in Poland.²⁶ The Catholic Church's dialogue of action caused a cross-sectoral cascading effect determining the direction of interreligious dialogue exchanges between Catholics and Jews.

People remember words when they are reinforced by actions. And the Jewish people have not forgotten the Pope's interreligious dialogue, especially because he first communicated his interfaith message then subsequently engaged in a dialogue of action. Predominantly due to Pope John Paul II's commitment to Jewish-Catholic interreligious dialogue, demonstrated by his dialogue of action, a movement commenced. In response to this development, many Jewish interreligious activists established institutions and organizations devoted to Jewish-Christian interfaith agendas. Rabbi Jack, for example, formed the Center for Interreligious Understanding. The John Paul II Center in Rome fosters interreligious dialogue between Christians and other religious traditions. These institutions were created as a form of a dialogue of action. Also, these interfaith organizations were formed in response to the Pope's message of interreligious dialogue,

²² Pope John Paul stated in his homily: "We forgive and we ask for forgiveness." He then added: "We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and, asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant." "Pope Says Sorry For Sins of Church," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/mar/13/catholicism.religion>, March 13, 2000.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Bemporad, "Saint John Paul II's Outreach to the Jewish Community."

²⁶ *Ibid.*

particularly his dialogue of action. It is primarily because of the Church’s actions, not mere words, that pathways of interfaith unity began to tangibly take shape between Jews and Catholics.

In tandem with the other three dialogues, a dialogue of action particularly establishes a strong platform for facilitating and fostering peacebuilding. A dialogue of action strengthens the goals of interreligious dialogue in a myriad of ways. For example, language barriers are likely to hinder communications when interfaith dialogue is practiced on a global scale. But a dialogue of action uniquely speaks to all people—particularly to those without access to a translator. A dialogue of action says more than words ever could, as it leaves a lasting message, while words are limited and their message often ephemeral. Take, for instance, how John Paul II began his dialogue with an apology, however, it was due to his thoughtful and meaningful dialogue of action that he and the Catholic Church demonstrated their commitment to interfaith dialogue. Both actions and words are necessary to better convey a long-standing message of interfaith dialogue and fully achieve peacebuilding goals.

The Pope successfully engaged in the four stages of interreligious dialogue, and his example shows that a dialogue of action delivers longstanding results, especially when reinforced by the other stages of interreligious dialogue. With a dialogue of action, the Pope established a platform for peacebuilding between Jews and Christians. Bemporad expands on the influence of Pope John Paul’s dialogue of life, religious experience, and theological exchange. Bemporad also stated that the Pope understood the soul of the Jewish people. The Pope came by such an understanding not by words alone, but through engaging in the four stages of dialogue.

The Pope demonstrated his affection to the Jewish people by seeking out Jewish communities in the countries he visited to express greetings and support...His deep-seated humility, but even more, a genuine collegiality where he stated for all the world to witness the profound, I would say miraculous changes in Catholic attitudes towards Jews and Judaism, codified in Vatican II’s declaration, *Nostra Aetate*.²⁷

Here, Bemporad mentions *Nostra Aetate*, a document drafted during Pope John Paul II’s Papacy at the Second Vatican Council. This document offers avenues for engaging in the four stages of interreligious dialogue. Yet, primarily through a dialogue of action, such as the Pope demonstrated, did the draft and its interreligious message begin to take shape and consequently have a momentous impact on the interfaith movement. Jewish-Catholic interreligious dialogue first took root because of *Nostra Aetate*, while a dialogue of action ultimately demonstrated the Church’s commitment to peacebuilding.

Nostra Aetate presents a twofold message of Jewish-Catholic interreligious dialogue. 1) The document opened the door to narratives of Jewish-Catholic interreligious dialogue, and 2) it touches upon the importance of avoiding mistakes of the past. Additionally, the draft focuses on introducing a message of interreligious dialogue between all religions by expanding on the importance of approaching all non-Christian religions with respect—seeking collaboration, not condemnation. The document’s momentous undertaking of distinct but intersecting interfaith objectives, however, will remain only words if the draft’s message is not continually applied in practice.

²⁷ Ibid.

Nostra Aetate provides a blueprint for the Church's future engagement with interreligious dialogue; however, the 1965 document does not define or use the term "interreligious dialogue" once. This is primarily because interfaith dialogue is a relatively young concept. Consequently, many are unfamiliar with its meaning and also its potential. As the social conception of the term's definition continues to develop, interfaith leaders must examine successful interfaith exchanges of the past when furthering defining and engaging interreligious dialogue. Rabbi Jack, for instance, emphasizes the importance of a dialogue of action when he says: "Pope John Paul did not believe that documents were enough, but that actions to make these teaching known were also necessary."²⁸ Due to the actions taken to address the document, not the words in the document itself, Jewish-Catholic interreligious dialogue blossomed on a global scale.

To better understand the meaning and function of interreligious dialogue, it is important to examine the successful interfaith exchanges as well as look to scholars, interreligious activists, and religious leaders like John Paul II for guidance. Pope John Paul II's interfaith dialogue exchanges reveal that in alignment with the other three stages of interreligious dialogue, a dialogue of action must take place or, over time, the other three dialogues will likely leverage limited value. In short, for interfaith dialogue to achieve its defining objectives of peacebuilding, and for it to hold longstanding influence, a dialogue of action must be understood as an essential component of the terms' definition.

Words alone leave an ephemeral message while concrete actions shape a lasting testimony. On a long enough timeline, Jane Austen's famous quote becomes especially true: "It isn't what we say or think that [will] defines us, but what we do."²⁹ The messages that require actions to speak for them are usually the most lasting. Indeed, such messages of a dialogue of action are usually the ones that have the potential and capacity to make a consequential difference.

Interreligious Dialogue and Logos

The word "dialogue" comes from two Greek words: "dia" and "logos." "Dia" means "through" and "logos" is roughly translated to mean "word." So, an unpolished Greek translation of "dialogue" means: "a word in-between." This definition of dialogue is often understood as a channel, medium, or conversation: "a word in conversation." Although there are multiple translations for "logos," a few of the more popular interpretations are known as computation, reason, relationship, wisdom, explanation, and discussion. The beginning of John 1:1, as often translated in English, states: "In the beginning was the Word."³⁰ And by exchanging any of the previously mentioned translations for "logos" with "word," the message's meaning alters slightly; however, its substance encompasses a greater truth—remaining deeply rooted in the camps' of creation, connection, and communication. Take, one example: in the beginning, was the [reason]; does this meaning remain similar to John 1:1 if we exchange the biblical term "word" with

²⁸ Jack Bemporad, "Lectio doctoralis," Center for Interreligious Understanding, 24

²⁹ Jane Austen and Kathleen Viola James-Cavan, *Sense and Sensibility*, (New York: Broadview Press, 2001).

³⁰ Translation: New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (used by permission; all rights reserved). Hereafter, NRSV.

“reason”? The topics of “logos” generally expand in scope to interfaith dialogue topics thus characterizing the texture of all four interfaith dialogue stages.

In many respects, a commonality that all religions share is how “logos” informs the human experience: A journey toward discovering and embodying truths. All religions have substantial similarities, especially when it comes to the most compelling of existential queries. An introductory paragraph in *Nostra Aetate* acknowledges this common ground by introducing the many questions that align with the teachings of religious traditions.

Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what is sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?³¹

Each of these questions falls under the umbrella of “logos.” From the myriad of origin stories to other revelations presumed divinely inspired, these religious topics and many more serve as a commonality for all people; thereby, such platforms bring humanity a step closer to engaging in dialogues that lead to peacemaking. As the foundational elements of similar quandaries are a unifying factor influencing the human experience as it coincides with the religions people ascribe to, we can learn a great deal by collaborating with others to better understand these questions. And by searching together to find these ageless mysteries that dawned from the brink of creation herself, we can better learn from each other and ultimately build together a common ground that is both profoundly dynamic as it is strong.

Majority of religions offer a beacon for moral growth as well as human development through seminal teachings. A commonality found for traditions across the board can be found in how religious tradition’s seek to answer existential queries and provide solutions for ethical dilemmas. With interreligious dialogue, we have the opportunity to examine these commonalities that further human development by bringing justice and learning to the table instead of intolerance and ignorance. (History attests to the outcomes of intolerant and unaccepting convictions.) The great philosopher William James once summarized the role religion plays within the human experience: “Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”³² One interpretation of this pithy statement: All humans are a part of a large-scale community and intimately share this world and its mysteries. James emphasizes a major commonality between religious traditions by claiming that religions brings about “supreme good” and moral principles. Furthermore, this common ground exists between all walks of faiths.

³¹ Austin Flannery, OP *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations: A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 574.

³² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience a Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902).

Pope Francis officially set one more puzzle piece down in the furtherance of a big-picture vision for Catholic interreligious dialogue when he stated in the *Evangelii Gaudium* 2014 apostolic exhortation that: “Non-Christians, by God’s gracious initiative, when they are faithful to their own consciences, can live ‘justified by the Grace of God,’ and thus be ‘associated to the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ.’”³³ Pope Francis, as the leader of the worldwide Catholic Church, claims that the mystery, the unknown element of God’s boundless grace, which is similar in meaning to “logos,” connects and unites all people (Romans 5:18). The Pope’s acknowledgment is related to his understanding that humans are made in and through “logos.” In the Holy Father’s statement, he recognizes the value of all people and how they are connected by a greater power.

Pope Francis’ statement of recognition presents an obligation, even for those opposed to interreligious dialogue, that calls for recognition and acceptance of non-Christian traditions. No matter a person’s religious affiliation, according to Catholic doctrine, all people share an equal part of God’s grand design. Another way to put this, all are made in the image of God and came into being through the life of Jesus Christ (John 1:1-5). In this apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis initiates a dialogue of religious experience and theological exchange. He acknowledges that non-Christians possess deeply-rooted commonalities.³⁴ These similarities unite us and are far greater than what divides us.

Throughout my early years of religious studies, I learned a phrase which captures the influential factors that define all people’s outlook: “You are a product of your time and place.” With this in mind, as an individual who theologizes on just about anything worth learning about, I recognize that my subjective opinion is framed by my upbringing and religious background. To expand on a comprehensive overview of “interreligious dialogue,” this article examines the term through a Judeo-Christian lens. Although I reference themes and lessons from a Christian background, this is not to discount or overlook other religious positions. This study offers examples for how to examine themes and tools of interfaith in one’s personal religious tradition. In short, I am juxtaposing the lessons of interreligious dialogue with a popular religious tradition to expand on key themes of dialogue as well as present interfaith material in a unique light.

So, let’s examine God’s dialogue in the Biblical book of John’s intricately woven creation story in relation to interfaith dialogue. God is the creative life-force in all things who is at work in the whole of creation, which according to Christian tradition, began through dialogue. Although scientifically speaking, the big bang theory could also be interpreted as a dialogue between the cosmos, life, and matter. But to expand on such a dialogue that forms the cosmos in relation to interreligious dialogue, let’s return to the theological meaning of John 1:1: “In the beginning” was “logos” (logos is also interpreted to mean Christ). As God is incarnate with Christ, God also orchestrated creation. When the word (also interpreted to mean Jesus) became flesh and this “logos” identified with all creatures made of flesh.

³³ Here, the Holy Father references the International Theological Commission’s 1997 text, *Christianity and the World Religions*. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, §254.

³⁴ The Bible claims, for example, that all people emanate from the same origin (Acts 17:24–26, NRSV).

The Gospel of John’s creation story describes a “word” that is the first and greatest dialogue known to humanity—when the Lord spoke all of creation into being through a “word” or a dialogue. Thus, both through and by dialogue, life was wrought.³⁵ John 1 presents a perfect form of dialogue. For, through a sacred dialogue of creation between Christ and God, life and light came into existence.³⁶ Also with interreligious dialogue, we have the opportunity to better understand and discuss topics related to “logos.” To examine and compare the “logos” we may know (perhaps within ourselves), and the one we share with all people thus bringing fractions of its essence into actuality. For example, “logos” is often translated to mean “wisdom.” By examining the substance of “logos” in John’s creation story, we can better understand the purpose of interreligious dialogue and its trajectories, especially when considering its meaning in relation to other theological insights such as the *imago Dei*.

Scholars’ understanding of the *imago Dei* remains complicated, as interpretations regularly transition with the zeitgeist. In medieval culture, for example, up until the thirteenth century, during the intellectual and institutional shift from monastic learning to scholasticism in universities, the image of God was principally conceived as “man’s power of reason” because the educational system centered on theology.³⁷ In modernity, the *imago Dei* spurs on social and political action in feminist theology. Throughout the ages, the meaning of the “image of God” offers an ever-elusive characterization; but of its numerous interpretations, a theme of love remains a constant component to the meaning of *imago Dei*. Humans are made in the likeness of a loving God to pursue a relationship with the Lord and thereby learn from and enact this agape. According to biblical scripture, humanity is created to embody such love. For, we are made in the image of a loving God thus, all people have a propensity to love, and are designed to reflect back to others God’s image of love.³⁸ If we are made in the image of God then, we are designed to create, to gain love, to give agape, to seek higher truths, to adore wisdom, to connect as well as demonstrate all of the six Greek terms for “love” through dialogue.

The Bible holds that God is the source of all good things, and the greatest of these things all humans are designed to naturally know: God’s love. Paul describes this connection by allegorically alluding to a mirror that reflects the inner-self which he claims is understood through growing in a relationship with God: “For now, we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:12–13). When discussing the reflection of humanity in a mirror, Paul alludes to the *imago Dei*. He is perhaps also referencing the role “logos” plays in informing a Christian’s spirit (although the Gospel of John came about several centuries after his letter to the Corinthians). Paul teaches that divine gifts are a

³⁵ The “word” or “logos” is made into flesh while Christ’s light penetrated through the darkness, “and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5, NRSV).

³⁶ “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:9, NRSV). This illuminating “light” has several interpretations, including “enlightenment.”

³⁷ Joy Ann McDougal, “Feminist Theology” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 685.

³⁸ Part of the Christian journey is to live by God’s image and to allow such love to influence our understanding of “good” (1 John 4:7-8) as well as the actions we take. When discussing the creation story, the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, explains that humanity’s propensity or ability to love is partially due to how the image of God influences our conception of morality: “...man was what God is, Love. Love filled the whole expansion of his soul; it possessed him without a rival” Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 15.

product of God's boundless love. A love that we were created to give back to the world through cultivating gifts such as faith and hope.

Similar to Paul the Apostle, Saint Augustine in *Confessions* describes his relationship with God as an internal journey. He writes that he discovered the existence of God within the purest essence of himself: "I did not realize that the very root of my misery was that I had sunk to such depths and was so blind that I could not discern the light of virtue and of beauty that is loved for its own sake, for true beauty is seen by the inner eye of the soul, not by the eye of the flesh."³⁹ Here, he uncovers a divine beauty within his soul that he describes as an illuminating light of reason seen as if in a mirror displaying an inner dimension of himself that reflects his (to use a concept coined millenniums later) consciousness baptized anew by "logos." Saint Augustine examines a complex and dualistic relationship—one that is informed by the image of God and "logos," but resides within himself. His internal realizations and theological reflections derive from examining his recollected life and seeing his new self as embarking on a pathway to a "journey" to God—to an eternal home.

As the time-worn creation story of John begins: "in the beginning," there was a dialogue within the immanent Trinity (quite similar to a dialogue of action) wherein humanity was formed to embody the image of God (Genesis 1:27). From the brink of the world's existence, dialogue functioned as a form of "action." God created all things through "a word in between." We are also designed to reflect the Lord's image when engaging in dialogue. Essentially, humans are a reflection of God and are called forth to engage in the Lord's perfect form of dialogue by looking to the Lord's image for guidance and applying Christ's example.

And as the creative life force present and in dialogue with all of creation, Christ offers a paradigm for how to engage in interfaith dialogue. In a myriad of ways, God is joined to all of creation, particularly by the humanity of Christ. Christ is in continuous dialogue with us, acting as a mediator between God and humanity (Hebrews 9:15). When communicating, especially engaging in a topic related to one of the interpretations of "logos," we must learn from the dialogues in the bible. Jesus eternally remains in communication with all who seek His light. As the physical embodiment of the "Word," in Christianity, Jesus Christ represents the purest form of dialogue. I encourage all readers to examine their respective religions in relation to their faith's interpretation of both "dialogue" and "interfaith."

Christ's Model for the Four Stages of Interreligious Dialogue

Ideally, religion plays a valuable role in nudging traditions and communities towards gaining a sense of respect and tolerance for others. Christian teachings, for example, reveal that when one is pursuing truths and justice, actions and dialogue go hand-in-hand. As Gutiérrez rightly states, "one cannot be a Christian in these times without a commitment to liberation."⁴⁰ Biblical teachings affirm this position. One must help the poor and be advocates for the disenfranchised, particularly the stranger, the orphan, and the widow (Deuteronomy 10:18). When discussing biblical teachings, Christians regularly use an old-hat platitude to summarize the importance of communicating with actions: "You can talk the talk but can't walk the walk." This saying is especially popular in

³⁹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. R.S. Pine Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 132.

⁴⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 67.

Christian circles because good works, or acts, are central to Christianity. For, the teachings of the Christian tradition are grounded in tolerance, empathy, and love.

How would Jesus define “interreligious dialogue” if such a concept existed during biblical times? The widely known story of the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well holds many insights into Christ’s engagement with interfaith dialogue themes. As told in John 4:1–42, the story teaches that interreligious dialogue provides the platform for one to overcome socio-political divisions—from hatred and condemnation to political hostility and oppression. Furthermore, Jesus’ teachings on neighborly love and tolerance, especially in the face of discord, offer valuable lessons for addressing how to use interreligious dialogue as a powerful tool for peacebuilding.

In the story of Jesus and the woman of Samaria, Jesus breaches religious, cultural, ethnic, and gender boundaries of his time. Normally, Jewish men did not communicate with women in public (John 4:27), let alone women who had an adulterous reputation (4:17–18). Also worth noting, Jews and Samaritans did not interact. The Franciscan friar and theologian, Pat McCloskey, offers modern-day examples to explain the severity of the socio-political rift between the Samaritans and Jews.

Imagine the hatred between Serbs and Muslims in modern Bosnia, the enmity between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or the feuding between street gangs in Los Angeles or New York, and you have some idea of the feeling and its causes between Jews and Samaritans in the time of Jesus. Both politics and religion were involved.⁴¹

John 4 presents a model for how to overcome socio-political and religious boundaries by teaching that we are to engage in dialogue with others and accept them without judgment. At the beginning of the story, Jesus arrives at Jacob’s well exhausted from his journey. He requests a drink from a woman of Samaria who is drawing water at the same well (John 4:7). She promptly responds by inquisitively emphasizing the unusual nature of the interaction in 4:8: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Her surprise stems from the fact that a Jew is speaking, not only to a woman, but to a Samaritan with a bad reputation to boot. The division is further emphasized when Jesus’s disciples look upon their leader’s discussion at the well in disapproving silence.⁴² The disciples likely believed that Jesus was overstepping the religious, cultural, and gender divides of the time.

Despite the Samaritan woman’s initial reservations, Jesus proceeds to engage her in a dialogue of theological exchange (John 4:10–26) and discusses his teachings on salvation. She responds by engaging in a dialogue of religious experience (John 4:12) and theological exchange (John 4:19). Christ and the Samaritan woman discuss the limitless, life-giving, and freeing quality of God’s grace and love (John 4:21). Jesus intimately shares his message with the Samaritan woman (John 4:37), and she discovers profound meaning in his religious lessons. Although Christ’s message transpires to bring about conversion with the woman and many in her community (John 4:39–42),

⁴¹ Pat McCloskey, “The Rift Between Jews and Samaritans,” Franciscan Media, <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/the-rift-between-jews-and-samaritans/>.

⁴² “They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’” (John 4:27, NRSV).

the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman does not center on evangelizing rather the emphasis is placed on dialogue.

A significant lesson can be found in learning from Jesus's approach to communicating with another from a different religio-cultural background. When engaging in interfaith dialogue, Jesus is tolerant and non-judgmental. In John 4, Christ undertakes all four stages of interreligious dialogue (in a rather short time frame). Both Christ and the woman discuss topics of life (John 4:15–18), religious experience (John 4:20), and theology (John 4:21–25). It can be assumed that the Samaritan woman gave Jesus a drink of water. This act certainly presents the trappings of a dialogue of action, especially because the woman learns of the symbolic meaning of water (John 4:10–15). Jesus initiates a dialogue of action by staying with the Samaritan woman's community for two days (John 4:39–42) because he centers his attention on the Samaritans as well as invests his valuable time in helping them. Jesus engages in a redemptive and transformative dialogue with the woman. Whereas, throughout the signs of John, Jesus' miracles are central to his lesson, in John 4:17–18 Jesus may prophesize, but scripture emphasizes his dialogue as miraculous and important.

Jesus's communication technique illustrates the importance of overcoming cultural divisions and disagreements by working in harmony with others through learning and collaboration. The Catholic theologian, María José Delgado, elegantly summarizes this peacebuilding theme by placing the story in a contemporary context: "Still today the mouth of our own well continues to invite us, urging us not to fail in the struggle to re-establish equity in gender relations and peace among cultures and to redeem religion as a dimension of the human being in order to support paths which make our Church and our world more honest."⁴³ Interreligious dialogue exchanges are particularly strengthened when individuals are non-judgmental and tolerant of others.

The Good Samaritan parable is another well-known biblical story that touches upon how Christ might understand and engage in interfaith dialogue. The story illustrates the importance of demonstrating love and seeing all people as neighbors (Luke 10:25–37). Before Jesus' telling of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a bigmouth lawyer queries: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus references a commandment that comes after the *Shema Ysrael*, a Jewish prayer (Deuteronomy 6:4–7). He says that to reach eternal life one must "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). By contextualizing this verse in relation to Jesus' message, one's propensity to love changes amid the process of loving God. To love another as Jesus requests, we must love God as it shapes our heart, mind, and soul. Jesus emphasizes this law to illustrate the importance of loving God through the conceptualization of one's whole self. Christ teaches that all are to abide by the law of Leviticus; "loving your neighbor as yourself" (19:9–18). In loving your neighbor as yourself, whether a stranger on the street or a noisy roommate, we extol God by actively embodying and illustrating this love. Following the question from the lawyer, Christ's subsequent parable teaches about a concrete act of helping others (Luke 10: 30–37). Through acts and dialogue with God, we are transformed to "inherit eternal life" (Luke 10:25).

⁴³ María, Delgado, "The Samaritan woman and the Jew Jesus *In the New Testament*," *L'Osservatore Romano*, September 1, 2017, <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/samaritan-woman-and-jew-jesus>.

Imagine if the teaching “love your neighbor as yourself” was widely observed by all people? Christ teaches that we must do more than overcome contentious attitudes and prejudices, but actively demonstrate a neighborly love towards all people. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Jew’s well-known enemy, a Samaritan, helps another by demonstrating love for his neighbor. In view of the current conflicts, Jesus specifically chooses to assign a Samaritan as the parable’s hero to teach that his followers are to see all people as worth loving as neighbors. Jesus explains how to practice loving one’s neighbor by showing that this process involves concrete action (Luke 10:30). Additionally, Jesus sets the precedent for how to approach communication with all people, particularly those we may find threatening. Throughout scripture, these interfaith themes of tolerance and acceptance are taught by Christ.⁴⁴ The Good Samaritan parable conveys an interfaith message of tolerance and acceptance through practical action. A dialogue of action is fundamental to all interfaith exchanges.

Interreligious dialogue interactions provide the threshold for one to take the necessary steps to better understand and truly love and appreciate their neighbor. When engaging in interreligious dialogue, it is important to practice neighborly love and learn from Christ’s lessons on inclusion and tolerance (even when communicating with someone we may consider adverse or threatening). “Love for one’s neighbor [is] intrinsically connected and that basic to this love is active work toward social justice,” states the Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue report.⁴⁵ Let’s expand on Christ’s lesson on the golden rule, picture this: You are walking on your favorite urban street and a lady with wrinkles framing her kind, dark eyes (who smells quite bad and appears homeless) comes up to you asking for loose change. According to scripture, your response to this beggar may unveil the face of Christ himself. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). Jesus’ teachings show that Christians are to engage in interreligious dialogue by loving all people, no matter their religion, and approaching everyone as a neighbor. This process can begin by engaging in one of the four stages of interfaith dialogue with a non-Christian—as you would want to be treated.

All Christians are to engage in interfaith dialogue with those we may find threatening or perceive as enemies. The priest and senior advisor of the House of Representatives, Andy Braner, claims that the Good Samaritan story was told by Christ so that one may ponder and reevaluate implicit and explicit prejudices interwoven in social settings.

No, this story is clearly about asking yourself: Who you are most afraid of? Why are you most contentious toward? Who is the person or group of people in your life who cause you to feel the most disdain? The real message the parable of the Good Samaritan asks: Who do you [dislike]? Those are the people we should identify as [a] *neighbor*.⁴⁶

In the stories of the Samaritan woman and the Good Samaritan, Christ teaches that we should embrace and value diversity with tolerance and love (instead of avoiding it).

⁴⁴ Throughout the gospels, Christ repeatedly emphasizes the importance of practicing good works and helping others such as in his Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:26–46).

⁴⁵ “Report from the Fourth Phase of the Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue.”

⁴⁶ Andy Braner, *No Fear in Love: Loving Others the Way God Loves Us* (Baker Books, 2015).

The Good Samaritan story and the commandment in Luke 10:27 both teach that one can best demonstrate love for their neighbor through concrete actions. The parable shows that the commandment of Luke 10:27 is meant to be carried out in practical action. Yet, someone once told me that the practice of “loving your neighbor as yourself” is inadequate empathy, as many choose not to (or do not know how to) love themselves. Perhaps, it is more effective to get the intended point across by saying: “love your neighbor like your neighbor wants to be loved”? When the parable is read in context, however, Christ qualifies his commandment by expanding on the importance of loving God through the righteous assessment of one’s heart, soul, strength, and mind for a reason. Christ alludes to this internal reflection and then subsequently presents the Good Samaritan story to teach on the importance of internal and external development; of practicing “works,” even when engaging in dialogue. Transformation begins with internal dialogue with God, but a Christian journey is defined by practicing love for one’s neighbor, which is demonstrated by Christ’s example of helping others.

Similar to the previously mentioned revelation of Augustine’s internal and external journey, the inner workings of religious communities must practice and understand dialogue—both ecumenical and interreligious—then seek to embody these lessons by making a difference in their communities. Hand-in-hand, we must strive to bridge religio-cultural divisions through interfaith dialogue as it aids in forming a platform for peacemaking. Many can attest to the difficulties of peacebuilding as well as confirm that the road to peace is not paved by words alone. Religious tolerance and acceptance develop with interfaith dialogue (an internal change), but peace emerges more sustainably with a dialogue of action (an external transformation).

An urgent need exists today to address the ongoing religious divisions, polarization and conflicts that further fuel wars, injustices, and persecution. Interreligious dialogue is an essential tool for peacebuilding. And the four stages of dialogue offer a powerful platform for achieving interfaith objectives. If understood and engaged properly, interfaith dialogue will aid in furthering social justice and peacebuilding agendas. But its meaning continues to be misconstrued and its trajectories limited because the term is interpreted differently by governments, civil society, religious communities, and the general public. To make progress, the social conception must expand to better understand the four stages of dialogue as components that form the meaning of interreligious dialogue. How the term is defined will determine whether interfaith exchanges are bound to hide behind the walls of places of worship and academic institutions or, if interreligious dialogue will serve as a bridge leading to prosperous avenues where peace and religious plurality flourish.

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